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THREE YEARS WITH THE
9TH (SCOTTISH) DIVISION

FIRST EDITION *August 1910*

Reprinted *December 1910*

THREE YEARS WITH THE 9TH (SCOTTISH) DIVISION

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Lately Commanding 27th (Lowland) Brigade

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS AND MAPS

LONDON
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET
1919

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TO
THOSE GALLANT SOULS OF
THE 9TH DIVISION
WHO
FELL IN ACTION

"THEIR NAME LIVETH FOR EVER"

INTRODUCTION

“**LOOKERS-ON** see most of the game.” And since this plain tale is merely a record of one of the participants in the doings of the 9th Division, first as a battalion commander, and later as a brigade commander, it follows that his view-point is limited to those things, for the most part, which he actually saw, at first in his own battalion, and afterwards in his own brigade.

Obviously, for that reason alone, this does not presume to be a history of the 9th Division ; that will be written by the “**Looker-on**” in due course.

It is hoped, therefore, that those Highlanders and South Africans who take the trouble to read this will bear in mind that it has been written by a **Lowlander** serving with **Lowlanders**.

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M A P S

At end of Volume

FLANDERS AND THE YPRES SALIKN
THE SOMME
ARRAS

THREE YEARS WITH THE 9TH (SCOTTISH) DIVISION

CHAPTER I

THE START.—1915

“THE 9th Division has landed in France.”
How the news thrilled one!

It was J. K. of the 98rd who communicated this wonderful bit of intelligence as we met on a certain mild May evening at the dilapidated old farm near Armentières.

For months we had been plugging away, a “thin red line”; though it must be confessed that our difficulty was in keeping up our breast-works rather than in keeping out the Hun—but always cheery, always optimistic, always ready to be lightheartedly on the termination of the war by Christmas.

Little did we think then as we toiled at our irksome jobs—we were both adjutants in the same brigade—that we should be battalion commanders, and later brigade commanders, in that same famous division.

The first division of the new armies to land

in France! So it had come at last—that wonderful machine that was to be chiefly instrumental in breaking an even yet more perfect machine. And we knew it then; felt supremely confident that this would happen, though God knows that “Where ignorance is bliss 'twere folly to be wise,” as to the time it would take.

“Major Croft to proceed at once to command the 11th Royal Scots, 9th Division.”

The orderly-room sergeant handed in the message at our somewhat battered house, or remnants of a house.

I greeted the news with mixed feelings.

In the first place it had been my fortune to bring a certain famous territorial battalion out to France in the autumn of 1914; also I had been two years with this battalion before the war, and consequently had a pretty shrewd idea of the good points and the bad.

The quality of that particular battalion was of a very special kind, and I didn't feel inclined to start new friends and all that kind of thing.

On reaching the divisional headquarters I got shock number one—nothing less than a long and intimate talk with such an exalted personage as the divisional commander.

Now we had been an attached brigade before coming to the 9th Division, a no-man's-child among divisions, and consequently we didn't see much of divisional commanders, who naturally

paid more attention to their own families. I was told all that there was to be told about my new battalion by a pretty shrewd observer.

Next morning I had my first experience of the Salient.

It was the least happy of the four trips the 9th Division took to that delectable spot, because on the other occasions things were too exciting to give one time to "think of being a dog." And dogs we were in 1915—the under dog !

Pah ! How we loathed it all from the moment we got inside that bloody Salient: overlooked everywhere; shelled from every quarter; and it rained all the time.

Next morning we went up through Ypres in pouring rain—what an abomination of desolation!—to the brigade headquarters, a snug little place on Zillebeke Lake, rather like a ship's cabin. At this time Ian Hay, with his First Hundred Thousand laurels thick upon him, was machine-gun officer. The brigade never fared better than when he was mess president.

Sanctuary Wood in 1915 was indeed a wood and not a mere collection of half-burnt matches, which it became during the Passchendaele show two year later.

It is always an unpleasant job taking over a new battalion. One doesn't know a soul; moreover, battalions being usually conservative often resent the intrusive C.O.

Let it be remembered that the division had

lately come out of the biggest battle so far known in the world's history, these men who not a year before had never thought of war ; and with no time to stop and lick their wounds, they had been moved straight up into the Salient, for very good reasons doubtless. But it was a bit stiff on half-trained troops such as we were at that time ; for we had no real discipline in us, only a splendid keenness to go all out and die game.

Don't think for a moment that one belittles such a spirit—it won the war, there is no doubt of that ; but discipline is necessary, and we who have it now are the first to admit the need of it.

Battalion headquarters was a "Bairnsfather" dug-out near the cemetery on the edge of the wood ; its shelter was purely moral, and none but fools would have built it, much less have lived there ; for it was under full view from the Boche, and was a datum for his 5·9's when he felt in a playful mood, which was pretty often.

I mind me of a place called the Birdcage, which gazed proudly down on our communication trench from battalion headquarters to the front line. For days the enemy would never interfere with the trivial round ; and then—the best man in the battalion would die by a sniper's bullet.

In civil life it is extremely difficult for the

average man to discover and sort out the Men from the Monkeys: in war there is no such difficulty; for when death is a near neighbour the mask of convention is torn away, and one can gaze into a man's soul. Three A.M. in the front line on a cold winter's morning was therefore selected as a suitable time for an introduction to the company commanders.

Reader, come down the line and be introduced to two of them; one who survived, and one whose "name liveth for ever."

"The Bart," a Scottish baronet with a long pedigree and a lean purse, unravelled his lanky form from the leaky shelter and sank up to his fetlocks in mud.

"Rather a long line for a weak company."

"But there's a swamp on my left flank, sir, and the wire is good in front." Always an optimist was Old John.

"The Boche are right underneath us"—this to a question about the hostile mining operations—"but Kirky" (one of the subalterns temporarily employed on tunnelling) "has the situation well in hand."

"Any sniping?"

"Not much, and they're damn bad shots."

"You are rather an unfortunate height." He stood over six feet.

"Oh, they won't get me; I'll watch it." They got him shortly afterwards in that very spot, but luckily only a temple graze.

He was always an optimist, with a profound, and, as events subsequently proved, a well-founded, belief in the ability of Don Company to hold their bit of line against all comers.

And dear little Jack Cowan, the bravest of the brave, who died so gallantly at Longueval—what a magnificent child he was: so clean and straight and honest; adored by his men who would have gladly died for him; just a typical young soldier among thousands of British public-school boys who made the great sacrifice. One can see him now with his black mop of hair and his keen grey eyes; a confirmed optimist with a supreme contempt of the Boche.

The only trouble I ever had with Jack was at this time—a trouble which was none of his making concerning a certain neglect of duty on the part of one of his subalterns. Of course Jack backed his man; he was always a self-constituted champion of the downtrodden.

Later on in the morning I met The Sapper wandering disconsolately about the waterlogged trench with a bored expression on his face, a limp in his voice, and a general air of breaking up shortly which completely disguised a perfectly splendid fellow.

N. C. was another of the public-school type, who have served the division so faithfully and well.

But I wasn't impressed, for I was yet to learn his true worth.

Some excellent "minnie" practice on the part of the Boche showed the quality of the Lowlander: cool and stolid, it took something very exceptional in the bombardo line to wring even a "Dearie me" out of him.

A funny little pop-gun, with the courtesy title of trench mortar, worked by a wild-eyed enthusiast of a gunner from the low ground about 300 yards behind the front line, produced retribution swift and certain. More by good luck than good management—the opinion of the front line experts favoured the theory of a most colossal fluke—he managed to land one of his bombs slap into the Birdcage, a Boche mineshaft which overlooked our line. A thin curl of smoke followed at a short interval by a muffled roar seemed to indicate a bull.

Then the Boche went in to bat after the luncheon hour.

At 2 P.M. precisely the whole of our front line seemed to be in the air, with countless "minnies," innumerable pip-squeaks, and an accompaniment of 5·9's. He strafed us for exactly fifteen minutes; just about the time it took to get our 8-inch hows. on to him.

Smile not, gentle reader. Heavies were distinctly good-and-quick in the Salient at that time.

It must not be thought that our pip-squeaks were inactive—far from it; but ammunition was not poured out of the Salient in 1915

in such flowing measure as it was two years later.

And the most reliable evidence on the question of who really started the war is available from those who had to take four Boche shells for every one of ours, owing to Britain's complete unreadiness, which was apparent even as late as 1915.

What a gruesome mess there was on reaching the battered front line ; whole lengths of trench obliterated, and of the garrison mangled remains everywhere. Even their own mothers wouldn't have recognised them.

Why did we hate the Salient so much ? It was no worse than some other places ; "minnies" were just as bad at La Bassée. It wasn't the strafing : that we could put up with provided we had a decent rest when out of the line.

But we never got a decent rest. Our tours were :—Four days of Sanctuary Wood (and though it was the front line we liked that part best) ; four days of Maple Copse in brigade support, a high, unhealthy spot when the wind was up, as the Boche used to shell it severely ; four days of Dickebusch, when we were brigade reserve and supposed to be resting.

Resting—what a misnomer !

To get back there was a march of over 10 miles which had to be done in the dark ; and when we arrived there we found without exaggeration a foot of mud, for it was the wettest

winter there had ever been; we found also canvas huts with plenty of holes for ventilation. So the men were never dry, but lived and moved and had their being and their baths in a literal atmosphere of slime: unavoidable then, but none the less damnable.

"I will not soldier in Flanders in winter," protested the great Turenne when ordered to do so by his Royal Master—and he showed his sense.

The roads, too, were all worn to shreds, and it was a pretty high test to march those ten odd weary miles in the darkness of a winter's night and then do sentry-go as soon as the trenches were reached.

My first experience of Dickebusch was not encouraging. There was a very late funeral in Zillebeke churchyard after a battalion relief; and, since the padre failed to turn up, I had to take it on. Consequently, I did not find my two strange horses until 2 A.M. Then came a ride through silent Ypres in which no time was wasted, for two reasons sufficiently obvious to those who have been through the same delectable spot at night; and then a long and lonesome ride with the dear little mare who was the only one of the party who knew the way. And so we came to the noble pile of Dickebusch Camp.

Dog-tired, I rushed into a farm near by to find the only room already occupied by a lady.

I made a hasty scramble out, followed by crisp remarks on the lady's part in Flemish, and finally I anchored at the actual huts, having experienced a foretaste of the Flanders mud of 1915. But I had only just begun my troubles.

The orderly-room clerk offered to show me my billet. Now the orderly-room clerk was a stranger to me, but no stranger to the rum ration.

Trouble began at the outset; for he shot into a place of about the same consistency and depth as that which held up Monmouth's men at Sedgemoor, and I think that must have cramped his style. For three dreadful hours we wandered, most unwilling partners, round that infernal camp, trying to find my resting-place. I should imagine the dislike was mutual, for the orderly-room clerk was told some plain, simple home-truths. And then I got past the peevish stage and it really became rather funny; such is the state of utter lunacy to which one can be reduced—I began to laugh; and then the more we plunged from one quagmire into another the more laughter came upon me.

The orderly-room clerk became more mistrustful than ever at such an unseemly outburst; finally he landed me in high dudgeon by pure accident near the transport lines. I slept till noon.

The Boche disliked Dickebusch and its inhabitants disliked us; at least a report got round that after we had left the Salient a pair of Canadians who were laying wires tapped in on an interesting but highly incriminating conversation between the mayor and the Boche.

A firing party avenged much shelling of our camp.

One pleasant memory is of a bath following a ride into Poperinghe, the first bath for weeks.

I had fondly imagined that it would be possible to train at Dickebusch—vain hope! Even the keenest of battalion commanders could not cope with Dickebusch mud in November 1915.

There was one bright spot during those terrible weeks, and that spot was the officers' school at Poperinghe.

Started by the divisional commander, it was the beginning of great things for the British Army; and it is not too much to say that an example here was initiated which led up to those splendid training centres that played no small part in the successful ending of the war. For the officers don't merely make the regiment. They *are* the regiment: its soul, its body, its very life-blood; and half-trained officers involve untrained men and unlimited casualties.

The infantry of a division are parochial to a degree.

We live our little lives in our own little grooves, and it is surprising how limited was our knowledge of others outside our own battalion.

Of course the most improbable and impossible yarns would filter round to us in the trenches—that the Kaiser had shot himself this time ; that the Crown Prince was a prisoner in England ; that the Camerons had captured a Russian—this report no one believed though it happened to be true. All these rumours were manufactured at, and emanated from, the ration stand.

And one day there came a strong rumour from the same source that the division was going out to rest.

No one placed the slightest credence in such idle gossip, but it persisted ; and to our utter amazement there came a day when it was officially notified. But it was not until advance parties of another division appeared that the last doubting Thomas really believed.

How we pitied the poor devils coming into this awful hole of a Salient while we were going out to rest.

What glorious joys the word conjured up to the imagination : whole nights in bed ; no shelling or other strafes ; football, concerts, estaminets, shops, women and children—in

short, the hundred and one things to which a civilised creature was accustomed before the scourge arrived in our midst and ripped us out of our happy homes.

But before we went the Boche made a gas effort, a very poor one.

For days the wind had been in the east, and at that time nowhere on the Western Front was the wind up more than when it set from that quarter. We knew he was going to try it on the first favourable opportunity and we gave him a pretty warm reception ; the wind was unkind to him, too, at the last minute, for it changed and blew the gas back on to his trenches.

My battalion was relieved just before he attacked, and so we didn't come into it. But 12 miles back next morning, a Sunday, one could smell the gas very strongly.

It was freezing hard as we marched into the village of Outersteene at 4 A.M. How cosy and peaceful it all looked after the grisly horrors to which we had been accustomed.

The curious thing was that I knew the gas attack was coming—felt absolutely convinced about it.

The case of that splendid fellow Mabin, one of my subalterns who was afterwards killed at Longueval, recurs to my mind. He was absolutely positive that he would be

killed at a certain place which he accurately described to a friend. The friend, on hearing of his death, sent me Mabin's description, which I was able to verify. And there are countless other instances.

1

CHAPTER II

“ REST.”—1916

It didn't take one long to find out how rusty the battalion was ; the whole division too, for the matter of that. Red rust! So we proceeded to scratch it off.

Brigadiers are an infernal nuisance at times, for in order to get a battalion right the battalion commander must have a free hand ; any interference merely cramps his style and does no good.

Now here was the problem to be tackled : a crowd of camouflaged civilians with all the keenness out of them for the time being—and all the regular officers too ; for Loos had taken a heavy toll and the Salient had nearly completed the job. Hard words? Maybe ; but one knows that no other division would have come up smiling after such a long and cruel gruelling.

As a nation we possess two admirable qualities—drive and staying power : these two characteristics of our race have enabled us to win the war, though it is true that in

the early stages a good deal of our energy was misdirected. And a third national characteristic—one might call it a failing—that of belittling our own efforts and lauding those of the enemy, caused us slavishly to copy his methods instead of striking out on a line of our own.

This especially applied to bombing.

For the Boche, as usual, had anticipated siege warfare in which he had taught his people to worry and bicker in trench and sap when they could not see their enemy. And we followed suit only too well. For during the first winter in Flanders we had no rifle ranges where we could practise the art in which we excelled. And, since the national characteristic was burning hot within us, we must turn our energies on to something—and bombing became highly fashionable.

The men took to it like ducks to water, for it made a comforting noise, very soothing to nerves tight stretched in battle. But it caused us to lose our birthright, and our reputation as the best shooting nation in Europe.

It was not for a junior battalion commander to question the wisdom of his superiors; and the battalion was "entered" to bombing with thoroughness—most decidedly with thoroughness! An intersection league was started; and when it is remembered that there are sixty-four

sections in a battalion, it is not wholly surprising that it was not till just before the first battle of the Somme that the final was played off; for in all battalion competitions we always played best and worst, to encourage the good to be better and the bad to change the error of their ways.

The result of that competition gave one furiously to think: for the average throw was 20 yards, and the average direction would not have taken the bomb into a one-foot ring.

Doubtless, my masters, you will say that it was rotten bad bombing.

True, no doubt. But before you criticise, be honest with yourselves. Did you make *all* your battalion go out on daily parades? Or was there a noble army of employed men? It is the average of which I talk, not of the favoured few experts: for experts we would not have; the name was anathema in the battalion.

Now here is the sequel:—We had one bombing fight at Longueval, the first opportunity we had of putting our skill as a battalion to the test; and the fight was conducted by a company commander who eventually shot his man!

And the shooting!

All who were at Longueval on that fateful 14th July will remember the Boche snipers in the trees who took such heavy toll of the

division ; Boches running away, Boches creeping up, Boches counter-attacking ; and at 200 yards they were perfectly safe from our rifles because, forsooth, we had forgotten how to use them !

It is not true to say that we had entirely neglected our rifles. Wherever we could find a bank we blazed away at jam tins. But it does not appear to serve any useful purpose to shoot at a mark which you can hit equally well with a stone thrown with the average skill. So during 1916 we had the remarkable state of affairs where the largest army we had ever produced would have been completely outshot by the archers of Crécy at 800 yards.

The Somme taught us our lesson, though, and it was a very different state of affairs in 1917.

Given constant warfare *plus* little training and the result is bad shooting.

There is no doubt that the month's rest we got at the beginning of 1916 was the salvation of the division. But we had to start from the very beginning. Section I. of Infantry Training right away through the book ; ceremonial to put on the guinea stamp of discipline ; and so on.

With constant inspections gradually things began to improve ; but all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, and football was the order of the afternoons.

But football was not the only recreation.

We had a very sporting crowd in the divisional train, who, in addition to feeding us without fail, considered it part of their job to amuse us as well. They, therefore, issued a most ambitious programme of every conceivable kind of sport, and one of the items was a cross-country race.

We entered a team for that race—four officers and sixteen men; and in order to induce any officers to enter, the C.O. was forced to be a most unwilling candidate. A week of no whisky and no smoking, with periodic runs across hopyards and enclosures, did not serve to allay the C.O.'s forebodings of an ill time coming in that terribly heavy going.

The great day arrived. Araminta, my mare, shied strenuously at the unaccustomed costume of her master, and thereafter shied at everything on her way to the meet; an air of deep gloom settled on the face of Burns, the groom. "The more mud the better the sport" is a hunting saw not applicable to the pastime of running cross country, though it may be fun for the onlookers.

There was a very strong field with teams from nearly every unit in the division. But the audience completely mobbed us; for the rumour had gone round, carefully fostered by his own battalion, that Winston Churchill, who had just joined the division, was a starter. Dis-

appointment ran high when it turned out to be a common C.O. who had been mistaken for the famous man.

Our tactics were Tod Sloanean to a degree. Bellamy, our star turn and a champion half-miler, was simply to race the opposition off their legs down the hill, while the plodders were to come with a wet sail at the end of it. The scheme succeeded like a charm, the pace being an absolute cracker.

The C.O. was sick three times during the period of agony, but managed to finish eighth of his team. And we won, to our great joy and astonishment. Immediately afterwards Bellamy won the officers' race.

A great lad was Bellamy, full of guts and ginger, with but one idea in his head—to slay the Boche. And it was his constant aim to get that spirit into his company. He was killed at Arras, and died the death for which he had always hoped.

Alas, of all that team of cross-country runners the C.O. is the sole survivor. How little did we think, in that quiet, peaceful country miles behind the line, and west of Bailleul, that the heavy hand of war would come down on it two and a half years later.

There was a burn called the Meteren Becque in which I used to bathe during that winter, with a certain amount of difficulty, it is true, for it was not very deep. One summer's

morning two and a half years later I walked up that burn when on reconnaissance from our front line; and those steep banks which one cursed in 1915 were blessed indeed in 1918.

I remember in those far-off days a certain divisional conference. To that conference everyone in the division who was anybody came: every unit commander in the division, each with his adjutant and second-in-command. It was a motley gathering, all its members as mistrustful of each other as only British officers can be.

For remember: at that time we were no division, but a mere collection of scattered units; the majority of the officers hardly knew anyone outside their units, and cordially disliked those they did know, after the old custom of the British regimental officer. But there was at least one man there with an open mind on the subject for the conference, and a mind above grooves and customs, however regimental they might happen to be.

He found us rather a rabble after Loos. He left us a division with a battle reputation second to none. For it was the new *esprit de division*, added to the old regimental spirit, which made the British Army so formidable.

A battalion, as he used frequently to remark, cannot sustain its reputation on the fact of a thread of black running through its gold lace, or because its sergeants wear their sashes

on the same side as the officers. The British public who fought in this war—the first war in which they ever have fought, by the way—was not concerned with customs which became a wash-out in war time. But it was very much concerned with getting a mention for its prowess in the field; and the division got it later on, and much too late.

It didn't matter whether a battalion had a good reputation or a bad: what did matter was its commanding officer.

A certain famous soldier used to say that it took three bad C.O.'s to spoil a good regiment, and that the time would extend over a period of years. Presumably he was talking of peace: for in war we know that a bad C.O. will spoil a good battalion in three months.

Of the gathering that morning in Merris, one became a member of the Army Council; one afterwards a Cabinet Minister; two brigadiers got divisions; half a dozen C.O.'s got brigades; and many more lost their jobs—elderly gentlemen some of these; and the war had no use for elderly gentlemen.

A man who is old in body or mind, or both, is physically incapable of sustaining the mental and bodily strain of the war. For he must be extremely active, otherwise he doesn't know what is going on in his commando; and in some divisions a great many of them didn't know.

They stopped in their jobs for just so long as they had senior officers who neglected theirs.

Another remarkable personage was a Highland chieftain whose clan had followed their leader into the field, not for the first time in history; and, curiously enough, the troops which that particular clan had fought a century and a half ago were commanded by a German.

There was a well-known actor, together with our old friend, Ian Hay, and the A.D.M.S. who, had he lived, would have made his mark; but it was otherwise arranged, and he was killed at Arras.

That building, too, in which the conference was held, has memories. But two and a half years later the place was no more than a memory, for it had been razed to the ground.

At that conference it was brought home to us that infantry and gunners must not work in water-tight compartments; it was a lesson one never forgot, and one saw then what a good thing it was for the division to have a gunner as its commander. Curiously enough after Loos we always had a gunner in command of the division except for a few days in 1918, and it was well for us that we had.

Battalion headquarters were very comfortable in a little farm during those happy weeks—for we were a happy family. There was a little too much gramophone music perhaps,

but after a while it was barred till after the luncheon hour, otherwise I really believe that Winkle, our Lewis gunner, would have played the confounded thing day and night.

Winkle had joined us on the 1st August and was quite the veteran in war experience, though by his looks he should still have been at school. A splendid, quarrelsome, dare-devil Scot was Winkle, but no match at repartee for Lemmy, whose rapier-like thrusts got under Winkle's bludgeon work every time; a result not to be wondered at, for Lemmy was a crabbed old bachelor house-master at Loretto.

And then there was Corky, our Church of Scotland padre, always trying to pour oil on the Lemmy-Winkle bicker, with the result that they both used to go for him. The only subject on which one could really draw that sweet-tempered, heavy, slow-speaking Ulsterman was that of his distressful country.

I never met a padre who did more among the men in a quiet, unassuming way than old Corky, and he was consequently an excellent intelligence officer, enabling one to keep a sure finger on the pulse of the battalion.

O——, the R.C., was just such another; with both of them the men's welfare was their first care; both had a tremendous influence on the battalion which they served. For a padre with personality can do much.

O—— was a walking cigarette-case—he always carried at least half a dozen well-filled cigarette-cases on him when he started out to visit his parish. It was no light job, strafing four battalions with billets miles apart.

O—— would make the most unscrupulous use of our interpreter, one Soichet, a priest in civil life, as assistant or curate. Soichet was distinctly useful as a finder of good billets, for he himself always doubled up with the village curé, and from the latter all the good billets in the neighbourhood were soon available.

The business of church parade in the army is an unmitigated bore, and ought to be abolished.

The Sabbath we are taught to observe as a day of rest. And yet in the piping times of peace men were forced to get up rather earlier than usual in order to clean themselves for church parade, though what church parade had to do with soldiering passes my comprehension to understand. One had only to watch the men during these religious exercises to be convinced that the good they got out of it was *nil*. And yet plenty of soldiers would go voluntarily to evening service, *if* the parson was worth listening to.

The whole thing should be voluntary. We made it so in our battalion—with the result that just as many men went to church as would have gone by compulsion.

During that rest period, if one wanted a hearty laugh one could always obtain it by going down to watch the officers' riding school after lunch.

There were several enthusiasts ; but though Loftus, the transport officer, toiled with them unremittingly, they did not seem to make very much improvement.

We had a pack pony, Little Jimmy by name, a winner times and again of divisional competitions. Little Jimmy was about as near perfection for a pack pony as it is possible to be : tremendous girth, short back and short legs, but not a comfortable ride to a short-legged man. One Smith was his jockey, and Smith was very short in the leg.

At the end of the riding school Loftus used to give them a gallop. Jimmy knew exactly what was expected of him. *Ventre à terre* off he went—to his transport lines ; and then stopped dead at his place in the line, gazing sorrowfully at Smith who had continued the motion.

James came through it all : has been in every battle, and is the sole survivor of all those pack ponies which did such yoeman service especially in open warfare. He must be about the oldest hand in the division.

Something will have to be done for James.

At the end of our five weeks we were reviewed by our Army Commander, General

Plumer, and that always meant fighting. To our intense astonishment, however, we were sent into a very quiet bit of the line: but the knowing ones knew that Windy Bill had not earned his *sobriquet* for nothing. And they were perfectly right. Relieving another division is always a loathsome business, and this relief was no exception. I went up to take over my little bit with Winston Churchill, who described himself as cavalry soldier run to seed; all the same the Service lost a good soldier when Winston took to politics.

It was indeed a peaceful spot. I saw only one shell-hole near the front line, and I was told in an awed whisper that it had arrived but the day before!

We went into Plugstreet Wood with our tails well up and pipes playing, for we were fit and hard, and ready to cope with the Boche on level terms once more, thanks to that Heaven-sent rest; and God help the Boche when taken on under such conditions by a Scottish division.

CHAPTER III

PLUGSTREET WOOD.—1916

IT was spelt in some weird manner which had nothing whatever to do with “street.” But all self-respecting Britishers, treating the matter as mere foreign foolishness, immediately christened it Plugstreet, and Plugstreet it remained.

The wood covered about ten acres and consisted of well-groomed trees—they grow timber for use rather than for ornament on the Continent—with a fair amount of “lie,” mostly brambles, though there were patches of bracken. It was reported to belong to one Hennessy of “three star” fame. And he evidently preserved; for even when we arrived there were quite a number of pheasants. Our poachers soon changed all that.

Our particular sector was the eastern edge of the wood itself, and it extended for about 1000 yards.

About 500 yards in rear of the front line was the support line. And battalion headquarters were about 300 yards in rear of the support line.

Our custom was to do four days in the trenches—this was increased later on when the weather became warmer—and four days in huts in the western end of the wood ; when in “rest” we were therefore about 2000 yards behind the front line.

“Rest”—save the mark ! I think the men preferred being in the trenches ; for when out at rest they had to march up most nights to dig and delve. Think of it, you people who stayed at home, what this meant. For four months we never left the wood—always working in every kind of weather, day and night. Our huts were made of canvas, with muddy floors ; for night-working parties always brought in a peck of mud to the cleanest hut.

Of course it was far better than the Salient, for we had plenty of duckboards, otherwise we could not have moved in that very swampy wood. But after a month the quiet sector became a quiet sector no longer. For Windy Bill got to work with his guns and a new C.R.A. first. Later he began to ginger up the infantry.

When we arrived at Plugstreet, with the exception of the church, the village of Plugstreet was still standing. On the Boche side also a great peace reigned. When we left, most of the farms on either side of the boundary had been “done in” to the huge discomfort of us all ; villages no longer existed, and the term “quiet” was no more applicable.

We took turns of duty in the trenches with the Highland Brigade, our own particular lot being the Watch. They were right good fellows to work with, and, when the silly little bickering to which all rival battalions were addicted had been overcome, we hit it off very well. But at first it was no easy thing to keep the peace. It caused far more trouble than the Boche in those early days.

The sort of thing that used to happen was this:—The Watch, we will say, were relieving our people in the trenches. On taking over, the company commander of the Watch would find a beautifully executed drawing of our regimental badge, which he promptly covered with a similar effort of his own. Our man would be doing precisely the same thing in the log-hut which he had gone back to; probably putting himself thereby to no end of trouble and inconvenience. Just like so many children, you will say. One has to confess that this sort of thing has been going on for years in the old army; but I never could fathom why it should carry on in the new. Gordon, their C.O., afterwards killed while commanding a brigade, and I, both did our best to stamp the feeling out, but it died hard and we never really killed it.

It was indeed a pleasure to work with Gordon.

We had a working arrangement to come up

the day before we took over the trenches and crab each other's efforts. The result was the best trenches I have ever seen in France or Flanders.

Of course the sappers helped enormously. One will always remember the part those splendid sapper subalterns, N— C— and R—, played in helping with the more technical part of framing and boarding the breastworks. For everywhere there had to be breastworks; the place was far too swampy for trenches, to which fact many of us owe our lives.

In those days we were not greatly enamoured of the pip-squeak—our own. A few unrehearsed and involuntary experiments in our shrapnel barrage had forced us to the conclusion that it didn't amount to much as a man-killer in trenches. And so one cultivated the 4·5 how.

Now the 4·5 how. battery commander was an expert, with a great love for his weapon. Consequently, we became very much attached to it, and prejudiced in its favour perhaps. For Usborne was something out of the ordinary, even for a gunner. And we infantry all take off our hats to the gunners—make no possible mistake about that.

He had been in the army, but had chucked it before the war, because the drone-like existence of a gunner subaltern with no prospects of promotion did not appeal to a man with ability

'above the average—miles above the average. And he had taken up doctoring—was, in fact, walking the hospitals when war broke out.

I found that when I wanted the Boche really tickled up, Usborne's hows. could make a better job of it than anything else.

We used to visit his O.P. on St Ives in the afternoon most days of the week if I could get away, and from that splendid view-point we would pick out various tit-bits in the Boche lines, spread out so invitingly before us. For St Ives commanded the whole country to the river.

Usborne had made his O.P. with care. Far away from the madding, and incidentally well-strafed, crowd of ruined buildings, it was completely hidden. Under his able tuition I became quite an expert gunner, and the knowledge thus gained helped me to realise the gunner difficulties, which was a great help later on in the battle—to the gunners. We didn't always shoot at the trenches, though. There was a main road about 4000 yards away which we overlooked from our O.P., and which was freely used by Boche cyclists. Why were these Boche cyclists always fat and perspiring? Their antics were too much for me; and many is the time we got leave to shoot at them. Not that we ever hit them, but we used to go pretty close, and they would break all records when the first shell arrived.

It was a perfect O.P.; one could see the country for miles around, and on a clear day it seemed that one could throw a stone into Messines, a tall, gaunt ruin like some forlorn creature holding out her arms to the sky—a plea for vengeance.

Our battalion headquarters in the trenches were huts, known as Rifle House. These huts would have been pleasant enough in peace time, but they would not keep out anything. Now the Boche had a playful habit of spraying the wood during the silent watches of the night with machine-gun bullets. He had all the duckboards "taped"; and since there were no trenches into which we might fling ourselves in case of need, we were frequently forced to crawl for quite a long way on hands and knees.

Corky lived in a hut near the bomb store; and this hut was constantly strafed by M.G.'s, much to Corky's annoyance. It was reported that he undressed while lying on the floor—an irksome effort.

Usborne and his subalterns often came across from their huts to play bridge, and quite a dangerous walk they used to find it.

The hows. were quite close to our headquarters—not altogether a good thing, perhaps. But the Boche gunners never found them during those four months.

They found poor Usborne at Arras next year, though.

Our battalion headquarters when out of the line were a keeper's cottage in the wood, called Creslau. It was quite a pleasant spot, a thatched cottage with a little moat: very damp, but that didn't matter. When we got there first we found some stuffed pole-cats and also a pine-marten. I couldn't believe that they came from the wood, until E—— of the Watch trapped one in the wood near Rifle House.

How they had been allowed to live in such a heavily preserved country is a mystery. He was a savage little beast and quite untameable; I hope E—— let him go when we left.

The Boche seldom shelled the wood, with the exception of the front and support lines and the western edge in the vicinity of the huts. But we had fairly heavy casualties from shelling.

Our line was peculiar. On the right it ran squarely south to north for about 500 yards, covering all that was left of the village of Le Gheer.

By the way, Bairnsfather had immortalised Le Gheer by the incident of the squeaking pump. We all knew that pump!

Then the line on its way northwards suddenly stopped and ended in an appendix known as the Hampshire T. From here it ran back for about 300 yards due west. It then carried on for about 500 yards due north, and afterwards advanced 300 yards again due

east, subsequently going due north again in the normal manner of well-conducted trenches. Why it retired gracefully in this extraordinary way I was never quite able to make out—doubtless for reasons not entirely unconnected with the Boche, whose line was advanced and ran parallel to the bit from which we had retired.

Our patrols found many of our men out in this bit of No-Man's-Land ; the bodies must have been there for over a year. They were difficult to bring in owing to an almost impassable marsh, on which duck, coot, and moorhen used to breed, undisturbed by the most intense bombardment. At night the birds always roosted in the trees just over our front line, and they were most excellent watch-dogs.

This little Boche salient was called the Birdcage, owing to the masses of wire which they had put up round it.

But all unknown to the Boche, trouble was brewing for him underground.

In addition to our other night working parties we were called upon to supply carrying parties for explosives for the eventual uplift of the jolly old Birdcage. It was to be the biggest mine in Europe, and to judge by the number of carrying parties we were called upon to supply we could well believe it.

We were gone, though, before it went up, if

it ever went up. We were frequently promised that it should go up, but doubtless it was waiting for the Messines battle.

How the men must have hated Plugstreet ! The private soldier had a deadly round of toil, hardship, and personal risk, which went on for four solid months. With the officer there was always the responsibility to kill boredom. All honour, then, to those gallant fellows.

Don't forget them too quickly, gentle reader, and see to it that they get the jobs which they have so well earned ; for did they not prevent your own happy homes from becoming Plug-streets !

The divisional commander was not satisfied with our infantry organisation ; at least, being a practical person, he wanted to remove the question of sections from the realms of theory, and make them the vital factor in our organisation which they ought to be. So he formed a committee of C.O.'s and others, and we drew up a scheme which dealt pretty thoroughly with sections. Fighting Sections we called them, in order to make the dull dog prick up his ears and take notice. In that scheme was embodied all that a section would do, what it would carry, and generally how it would comport itself.

General Headquarters considered it necessary to issue instructions about sections as the result of lessons learnt on the Somme ; and from a

perusal of those instructions it is not unreasonable to suppose that they were based on the ideas culled from the 9th Division. It was not the only matter in which the 9th Division were the pioneers.

That committee taught us a great deal about the division ; and we really began to know people outside our own little circle.

My great holiday was a visit to our transport lines.

The transport lines were far removed from war, and we often used to hold a local horse show, at which my friend N——, of our company of the A.S.C., was always willing to take on the onerous task of judge ; and right well did that stalwart man of Kent perform his job. They did a vast amount of good, those horse shows, and it made one proud to see the perfectly splendid turn-outs that the men produced when gingered up by Kirky and Sergeant W——. A very happy family was the transport section in those days.

While at Plugstreet raids became fashionable. A division next door had done a few ; but the Scot, a slow mover, looked upon such innovations with suspicion, and we didn't have much success—then. It wasn't from want of trying, though. All through the bad part of the winter our patrolling was constant ; but the Boche wouldn't come out, and it takes two to make a quarrel.

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We had special clothes for patrolling, and special heelless boots; also rifles with a quick release which could be slung tight up against the back, and so would not cumber a man when crawling, and yet could be immediately available if wanted in a hurry. We even had white suits of clothes for crawling in the snow.

And it was healthy to crawl, though we lost many men through pure laziness and impatience, when half an hour's extra crawling would have saved their lives.

I remember a case of this very well. One winter's night in driving sleet, young Keane and Sergeant Payne, a pair of daredevils who spent all their spare time in No-Man's-Land, went out to wander round the Boche lines.

A Boche Véry light went up and disclosed the fact that our two men were right up against his trenches; instead of sinking down into the nearest shell-hole Keane began to move off. The Boche got him, and the sergeant lost him in the snow. Keane had got one through the body, but went back, missed the Hampshire T., and wandered right back into the bend in our lines. Then luckily he saw the red lamp which we had put in the Hampshire T. facing our lines, and he managed to crawl to this; we found him and carried him back, but he was nearly dead with cold. He came back to us two and a half years later, and died

gallantly in repelling a Boche attack near Meteren.

The Boche was extraordinarily good at picking up our order of battle and other information in those far-off days, which appeared to us in our innocence to verge almost on the supernatural. Undoubtedly he got much of his information by means of their listening sets, through which he overheard indiscreet and unofficial conversations between telephonists. Our sentries helped him a bit, though ; for I well remember one night, when I was farther away from the front line than the enemy, overhearing one of our sentries challenge—and the answer “Royal Scots” quite clearly.

But one never could quite fathom the mystery of a certain raid which Bellamy did, and which resulted in a costly failure.

We had found a gap in the Boche wire. On several nights Bellamy had been out on patrol, and had noticed the sentry very unalert, with the group near by him obviously asleep. On the night in question he went out, found the sentry unalert as usual, and came back to fix up a raiding party. We had no telephone conversations, and my orders were communicated verbally. The men went over in perfect silence, and one couldn’t hear a sound as they formed up and went forward across No-Man’s-Land.

It was of the utmost importance to get an

identification, but, as Bellamy considered that a small party could easily do the job, only a dozen men went out.

Suddenly a terrific machine-gun fire broke out. The Boches were absolutely prepared, and, since it was useless going on, our party came back in a hurry. Three men were left out; two of them, Sergeants Payne and Briggs, the best scouts in the battalion. A search party hunted for their bodies all night, but as it was so inky black they failed to find them. We located them next morning. So did the Boche, who fired at them throughout the day. Payne had had one of those extraordinary premonitions before he went out, for he said good-bye to his officer and told him that he wouldn't come back. He also wrote home some days before he died to the same effect. He was a boy completely without fear, and it is bad for England that the pattern should have been destroyed, for he was a bachelor.

When the spring came to Plugstreet what a perfect paradise the wood became, with tender vistas of green everywhere. The country, too, dried up, and so it was possible to explore the wood. Later, as the weather became warmer, every bush seemed to hold a nightingale which night and day gave thanks to God that the winter was past. But the cuckoos provided the comic element; for they cuckooed day

and night, and seemed to pit their cuckooing against the noise of the guns. At whatever time of night the guns started firing the cuckoos chipped in too. Really one had rather too much of the cuckoo at times.

In early May Boche shelling increased a good deal, especially in the vicinity of the Hampshire T. One night we heard the most appalling bombardment; it turned out to be an intensive bombardment followed by a raid. All through the next week things continued to stiffen up, Hampshire T. and its vicinity becoming a most unpleasant spot to live in. Then one evening just as I got up to the front line all our O.P.'s crumbled up like a pack of cards, and so the fun began: heavy T.M.'s, 5·9's, 4·2's, pip-squeaks, and machine guns as hard as the Boche could lay in for a solid hour: concentrated essence of hell turned loose on the luckless Hampshire T. A little band of us crouched at the bottom of the breastworks; but though some of us were knocked out the rest seemed to treat it as all in the day's work—the phlegmatic Scot is a useful man at windy work. After an hour it all stopped as suddenly as it had begun. A prowl round with Henry, the company commander, showed us that we had suffered pretty heavily; then back to headquarters as quickly as possible, for all my people were on leave and there was no one to mind the shop.

On the way back I looked in at the support line, a new one just completed 80 yards behind the front line, to see if all was well. And then the big bombardment began again, only ten times worse than before, if possible, and all on the support line !

Framed trenches are splendid in a bombardment, for unless a shell gets you in the pit of the stomach, all is well. That is, you don't get squashed out of sympathy as you do in a trench if a shell falls near. A shower of sandbags, I must say, is not exactly pleasant, especially when one has to be unburied afterwards.

It was getting dark, and in that infernal din we listened anxiously for the lift in the barrage to indicate the raid which we felt must shortly come. Then suddenly dead silence fell again after an hour; a silence that simply stunned us after the roar. And presently Henry came along to say that he had ten dead Boches in his trenches; so they had come after all, though we just in rear knew nothing of it.

The Boche communiqué reported that he had raided our trenches, penetrated our second line, blown up a mine, and captured prisoners: the mine referred to was our old friend, "the biggest mine in Europe." The fool! That mine was on the other side, opposite the Hampshire T. Had he gone there he most

certainly would have got it. An officer in our trenches for instruction—he belonged to another division—told us afterwards that Gallipoli (he had been all through it) was mere child's play to that bombardment. But we relieved his mind with the assurance that we didn't get that sort quite every day.

What a mess those trenches were in; our casualties were a hundred. All night we toiled and delved to make the trenches passable for the Watch, who were relieving us on the following morning. There were so many gaps that one was completely exposed in walking round. Through the night the men worked in pouring rain and under constant machine-gun fire. For the Boche, with devilish cunning, knew exactly where he had done most damage and he never gave us a moment's peace.

Apparently the Boche had come over in three parties, one of which encountered Henry and his commando. There was a fierce fight, in which our fellows did not use a single bomb because they were far too busy killing Boches, and bombs merely kill your own side in nine cases out of ten.

They brought over a number of land mines for the purpose of doing in the mine, and also a lot of silly little notice-boards. They were the 104th Saxons, and that was the last occasion on which they assumed the offensive

against us as a division. Later on the Lowland Brigade took the offensive against them with unhappy results—for the 104th Saxons—on four different occasions.

Just before we left Plugstreet the South African Brigade came to us; this caused the abolition of the 28th Brigade for three years. They were a fine lot, the South Africans, and any division in the army would have been proud to have them. But we were not particularly happy about the arrangement; for, you see, we had been blooded at Loos together, and we all felt that it was a bit hard on a brigade which had died well to be cast aside like an old rag, however good the displacers might be.

The original South Africans were mostly old soldiers with a fair sprinkling of Boers who had fought against us in the Boer War. By gum! they were magnificent men and officers. There were not a few District Commissioners serving in the ranks, and the great majority should have had commissions. Unfortunately, too many of them joined that far greater majority at Delville Wood.

We were delighted to leave Plugstreet, where the mosquitoes were just beginning to announce their presence. And then we started a long trek. Right away we marched to a training ground miles west of Béthune, away up in the hills. The men, dear things, had got

it for sure that we were bound for Italy ; why, goodness only knows.

Our billets were palatial after Plugstreet. Our battalion was in a most delightful village called Delettes, which straggled along the banks of an equally delightful river. Here we could bathe, and here we set out to lure the artful grayling. The trout would have none of us till the May-fly came on, and that didn't happen till just before we left.

The training area consisted of growing crops which we were told to ignore—"But be as careful as you can." It seemed almost sacrilege trampling through half-grown wheat and clover ; but we took to it quite kindly, for one gets used to anything in war.

What a training ground ! The sort of thing one dreams about but seldom sees. For there were quarries where we could shoot ; and great rolling uplands where you breathed God's purest air, and where you could go for miles without seeing a soul. And the whole place was cultivated, one vast cornfield. How those French peasants must have worked ! And we who lived with them knew exactly what their hours were. From dawn to dusk, winter and summer, out they all went to the land. It was a magnificent effort for France on the part of her old men who before the war had ceased to toil, and spent their declining years among their bees and flowers in summer, and in the chimney-corner

in winter. Then came the scourge, taking all the young men of military age. So the old daddies and ancient dames went into harness once more, and with the little children they toiled that France might win. The Spirit of France!

We came to that training area four trench-worn companies. We left it a battalion, with a pretty shrewd idea of each other's qualities and limitations. One brigade field-day with guns stands out in my memory. We had to perform a long approach march on a compass bearing, and then we discovered our limitations. But it was priceless experience. On that day too, as we waited, we found that we were not the only people who wanted exercises in open warfare. A battery was coming into action not far from where we rested—too far off for us to recognise the battery, but not too far off to recognise the battery commander's voice.

It was Usborne addressing his lads, and Usborne was reputed peevish before breakfast. There was no doubt of the fact!

After ten days, all too short, we were warned for the Somme.

We did not then know our destination, though people at home, thanks to some babbling criminal, had informed us of it months before.

But the soldiers out there were told nothing.

“If I thought my coat knew aught of my plans I would burn it,” said the Great Frederick. And would to God we could have stopped the leakage ; it would have saved us many thousands of casualties.

CHAPTER IV

THE SOMME.—1916

WE marched for two days, entraining at Berguette. Next morning we passed through Amiens, and shortly after we began our approach march to the Somme. It was at our detraining place that the old fever hit me hard. And so, being forced to take a lift in a divisional car, I met my friend Griffiths for the first time. How many hundreds of times has Griffiths driven me since then, I wonder!

We stopped at Corbie for the night, the place with a perfectly hideous cathedral—or was one too ill to appreciate it? And late that afternoon we camped in the Bois Célestine, a delightful spot high above the river in which Jack Cowan and I had many a jolly bathe. Here we first met the golden oriole. How they reminded one of West Africa, with their flute-like note and gaudy plumage flitting from tree to tree, just above the place where we bathed.

When the war is over I shall revisit the Somme in a canoe.

Now we were let into the awful secret of our rôle in the coming battle. The 9th Division was in the 18th Corps—we were to go through on the second day, after other divisions had cracked the nut. Most of us didn't approve this rôle much, for experience had taught us that the first crowd got all the honey, while the second lot usually got the bees which had been disturbed by the first comers.

So we went in select parties to reconnoitre. And we voted the Boche suspiciously quiet—altogether too quiet. But, as events turned out, he did not expect an attack in that particular quarter.

We stared hard at Montauban during those days of quiet preparation. It looked a nice, peaceful village, standing proudly up in its own grounds. Bernafay and Trônes Woods we didn't like the look of much: and we were right, for they were to cost us many casualties.

We moved up to Bray for a few days to dig new trenches, and then back to Célestins. Then on the 29th of June, we made a night march in pouring rain, a march which thoroughly damned those silly little Lewis gun-carriages, because their wheels were much too small. All day of the 30th a 5·9 how. shelled our camp, but nothing very close: however, he made some pretty lucky shooting at our transport. That night we marched up to our position of ready-

ness by an infantry track. Our place was a gully about a mile east of Billon Wood. The Boche gassed the valley which we had to cross, and it made the walk unpleasant. This place was just at the junction of the French and British: the former were the "Iron" corps from Verdun, where they had well earned their *sobriquet*.

In Billon Wood the French had some extraordinary guns, a cross between a "how." and a trench mortar, like nothing on earth; and I, for one, have never seen them since. These creatures hammered the Boche all night without a stop. Zero hour for the grand attack was at 7 A.M. A quarter of an hour beforehand the Allies started the most terrific bombardment that I had ever heard. Doubtless, its intensity was exaggerated owing to the fact that a brigade of French 75's were perched up just above our heads, and they contributed in no small measure to the din. There was no retaliation to this bombardment as far as we were concerned, and in about an hour's time our French pals told us that things were going very well indeed. Then later we got news from our own people: Mametz had fallen, otherwise "situation obscure." But our gunners told us that they had seen our men marching into Montauban in column of fours. One's experience is that in war no news is bad news. And things had not gone well up north.

That night the French guns just above us received some very accurate attention from the Boche—so accurate, indeed, that not a single hostile shell fell in our gully just below.

As twilight came I moved the battalion up, for we were to take over Montauban. As we waited at the rendezvous for our guides I saw the new moon, just visible above the setting sun; the battalion saw it too. How many of those splendid lads never saw another! Now here I made a blunder. Montauban was looking at us obviously, and it would have been easy enough to have found our way into the village. But it might have been difficult to discover the people we were going to relieve, so we thought it best to have guides. Now these guides were rattled; they had had twenty-four hours' heavy shelling, and even as we looked at it Montauban was going up like Vesuvius in eruption. I saw the battalion off under their guides, and then I walked up with Norman Teacher, our brigade major. We had a most unpleasant walk, we both agreed to that: and finally, after much difficulty, I found the battalion headquarters—a dirty little hole which would barely have kept out a pipsqueak. I found out also that the battalion commander had not the faintest notion where his people had got themselves—not a cheerful prospect when I had already committed my folk to the tender mercies of his guides.

The 5·9's arrived with unfailing regularity and despatch, usually in our vicinity, while we waited for our errant companies. About half-way through that trying night a voice on the telephone remarked, "You are senior officer in Montauban ; I was commandant of Montauban ; I have just been relieved ; you are now commandant of Montauban. Good-night." That was all. I wondered dully what one did as commandant. The S.O.S. went up freely and often, but nothing happened except some crisp protests from dog-tired gunners, whose men were beat from so much exercise, and whose ammunition was getting short. Who sent the signal up no one quite knew ; not my fellows, who wandered with those infernal guides nearly into Longueval, which was not taken till days afterwards. Finally, my company commanders sacked the guides, and brought the men back into Montauban just as dawn was breaking. We saved a lot of casualties by this mistake, for we certainly should have lost heavily if we had all been packed in Montauban that night. S—— of the one arm came nosing round during the night, but our combined efforts failed to make head or tail of my opposite number's dispositions. So we had to make a fresh plan.

We stopped in that hole for a week, shelled all day and all night, with no excitement to break the strain on our nerves except patrolling.

One of the companies was not too badly off,

for it found some really good Boche dug-outs in which was a canteen—with beer! Jack Cowan's company was worst off, for they had to make hidey holes for themselves on the weather side of Montauban; and the weather side of Montauban was a darned unpleasant spot at that time.

We had some bad luck with patrols there too. On taking over we found that our predecessors had completely lost touch with the enemy. It was of course essential that this first principle of war should be complied with at once. Several patrols were therefore sent out into Bernafay Wood next door as soon as it became light.

One of these patrols got right through the other side of the wood and saw what they took to be Frenchmen digging trenches. Instead of going with caution, what must they do but go up towards these men in a body. The result was that they were all knocked out—a great loss to the battalion. Bernafay Wood should have been occupied twenty-four hours before we got into Montauban: we occupied it twenty-four hours later and we had to fight for it, the two battalions, 12th Royal Scots and Scottish Borderers, doing a very neat little night show with complete success.

But next morning they got it where the chicken got the axe. The Boche simply blew the wood to pieces. And shelling in a wood,

as everyone knows who has tried it, is far worse than anywhere else, not excepting a village. As Montauban was the first village which we had taken and held in the war, it was naturally an object of considerable interest to brass hats. They came in swarms, and notably there came an ex-minister of war whom I had much pleasure in carpeting before our divisional commander for walking about my preserves without so much as a "by your leave." After a week of this existence we were relieved by our old friends the Watch, and we went back to Billon Wood to wash and brush up for the coming battle. Here I was ordered to go sick by our brigade commander.

However it wasn't likely that one would go back with *our* big battle in prospect, and so I managed to keep out of the way until we started for our night march. And the dear old chap was too busy to notice me. Never would I have forgiven myself for missing that battle. For on the 14th July 1916, the British Army performed one of the finest feats which have ever been done in war; to wit, a night march to a position of deployment within 500 yards of a vigilant enemy, then a crawl forward on hands and knees, to be followed at zero by the assault of a strongly wired and entrenched position which had suffered no previous bombardment to shake the moral of the defenders. And, in addition, Trônes Wood on our right rear, in

fact very nearly directly behind us, was as yet uncaptured !

The cool daring of the thing ensured its success. And how it appealed to our lads ! This was the sort of business for which they had joined up, not brutal, bloody murder, to which they had been accustomed for over a year. “Always endeavour to surprise and mystify your enemy,” should be, and must be, the soldier’s first maxim, otherwise he is not likely to be much of a success in war. I shall never as long as I live forget starting out on that great venture. On nearing Montauban, where the Boche was indulging in his usual antics—how he hated villages, the Boche—the whole brigade got into single file. We were leading battalion, and were fortunate enough to miss the shelling of the western outskirts of the village. But alas, it came down on the 12th Royal Scots who were immediately behind us, and got their colonel—Budge. Incidentally it converted what would have been a complete success into a partial one. For Budge had been entrusted with rather a complicated wheel which was eventually to clear the village. Had he lived, his fine battalion under his able leadership would have undoubtedly succeeded in the task ; but it was not to be, and Longueval was not finally cleared of the enemy for some weeks. Even now I cannot speak without deep regret and sorrow for one of the finest

regimental officers in the army. He knew he was to die, knew it perfectly well; his one hope was that he would die in the hour of victory.

On reaching Caterpillar Valley, 1000 yards in advance of our front line, we met Norman Teacher, our brigade major, cool and alert as ever. He had been engaged throughout the night in watching the Boche trenches with a party of scouts; a ticklish job, and he was mightily relieved to see us. There wasn't much time to waste, and we were barely in position before the move forward began. As I had a last look round, and passed a word or two with old friends, one little thought how few would be standing up in a short time. I spoke to Lemmy about his communications—he was now signalling officer—and I never saw him alive again.

Our C.R.A. gave us a creeping barrage on this occasion, the first time, I believe, that such a thing had ever been attempted. In this, as in many other matters, the 9th Division were the pioneers for that most successful form of attack.

For the benefit of those who do not know, a creeping barrage does not really creep at all. It consists merely of a succession of lifts at certain short intervals of time, and thus enables the infantry to keep quite close, and to smother the hostile trenches before the enemy has time to lift his head and function as a foe.}

We found our wire uncut, all in the dark, remember, when men's nerves are prone to falter. But the officers and N.C.O.'s went gallantly forward to the business of wire-cutting in face of a cruel machine-gun fire, promptly taken on by Winkle—gallant old Winkle—with his two Lewis guns. In less time than it takes to write about it he had them cold, firing high over our heads at first, and later silent.

The Argylls were on our right, and I shall never forget their old pipe-major strutting up and down a certain well-sniped road near the village, while we cowered in a ditch alongside. Someone pulled him down eventually, and his colonel sent him back to the transport lines, from which he made several attempts to get back to his battalion.

Our leading companies were right on their mark; but the wheel of the 12th Royal Scots did not come off, as Budge and most of their officers were knocked out. The men went forward, a gallant mob with no leaders, into the village. But they did not know what to do when they got there.

We found the Scottish Rifles had secured our left flank. And so, under galling fire from snipers in the apple-trees, we dug ourselves in with speed. We had sustained heavy losses, for Henry and Jack Cowan had been killed at the wire; L—— and the Bart. were wounded and missing respectively. Then Mabin, tempo-

rarily commanding the Bart.'s company, was killed later on in the morning, in the place where he knew he was fated to die. And the Highlanders had suffered even more than we had. What their casualties were I never knew: but Scotland knew, and so did South Africa; for later on the South Africans came into it at Delville Wood.

Remember this is not a history of the 9th Division, but merely the rough notes of one who was with that division: only a battalion commander with view-point necessarily confined to those happenings which he himself saw. One is always chary of writing about things concerning which one had but second-hand knowledge.

The casualties of my battalion in that first Somme battle were over 600, and 24 officers; and the great majority took place from zero to zero plus one hour—practically at dawn. No sooner had we consolidated our line than our troubles began. At first we blazed away, with much expenditure of ammunition but with little result at fleeing Boches and snipers. It struck me pretty forcibly that there was something uncommonly like a rout in the opposition. For they were most obviously “hareing” shamelessly for home, and those who were not were likewise obviously “getting their skates on.” I begged and implored someone to send cavalry to complete the victory.

But no doubt there were strong reasons against this course; reasons which we simple soldiers could not see, for all away up beyond High Wood were fleeing Boches. That was the first of three occasions on which I asked for cavalry; the other two being at Arras on 9th April 1917, and again at Broodseinde Ridge on 28th September 1918, though really on the last occasion I was merely a spectator, the divisional commander doing the asking.

Masses of cavalry are normally too unwieldy for the fleeting opportunity. And so it seems to me that we need to hark back to the old days of divisional cavalry, seeing that on those three occasions a squadron would have been of priceless value. The employment of cavalry must be left to the man on the spot, not to the man—however great a genius he may happen to be—who sits about 20 miles back. It is not a mere question of numbers, but of moral effect, which a squadron of cavalry is quite big enough to ensure. For the larger the number of troops who abandon their arms the greater the panic; and we just wanted someone to keep them on the run and not let them get their heads up, and then their hearts up, and then start shouting, "Let us die for the Fatherland," and then give it us all to do over again!

Well, we soon saw that the foe, since he found that no one followed him, began to

come back; first in twos and threes, then in larger numbers. Then a party began wiring on the high ground just above High Wood.

There were some subterranean passages right through the village of Longueval against which it was rather difficult to compete. The Boche had entrances well on his side of the village, and when things got a bit too warm for him down he would pop like a sewer rat by means of bolt-holes in most of the houses. He nearly got the combined battalion headquarters of the Seaforths and Watch. It was at night, and they were having food, when one of the battalion runners who had been nosing about suddenly rushed in to say that the Boches were next door. As their front line was some considerable way in advance this was particularly cheering intelligence.

My battalion was ordered to take the northern end of the village. It was very difficult to reconnoitre owing to the sniping; however, we gave them a real good doing with Stokes and that funny old trench mortar which looked like half a dumb-bell, and then we attacked with one company, while another was ready to exploit as soon as the leading company gave them room to manœuvre. South Africans were attacking on our right, more in Delville Wood; as a matter of fact we had to finish up at the bottom of the hill. And as we were already commanding that



LONGUEVAL AND PART OF DELVILLE WOOD.

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side of the village it was not a particularly necessary operation from our point of view.

We tried and tried all that day to cut through the impenetrable undergrowth stuffed with machine guns, but our progress was slow and slight. The South Africans had no better fortune in the tangle, and late in the afternoon we gave up the attempt. Turner and Sergeant A—, afterwards adjutant of the 11th Royal Scots, had worked like Trojans, and I was satisfied that they had done all that was possible in the way of leadership. The men were splendid too, always responding gamely to the call of their leaders.

When these two got back they found that they had left a man out, and they knew that he was wounded. Then Turner and A—, without the slightest hesitation, went back to get him; went back into that horrible tangle with machine guns shooting at point-blank range; went back to absolutely certain death, so far as they knew, in order to rescue a comrade from the tender mercies of fiends. Remember, these two had been on the rack for three days and three nights, and on the top of that they had been fighting all day under close machine-gun fire which had killed several of their men.

In all V.C. stunts the conditions are as important as the deed itself, and this deed was on all fours with many a pre-war V.C.

Turner got the D.S.O., and was killed at Arras next year. A—— got the D.C.M., and a commission. He survived the war.

It poured with rain all that evening, and when it got dark we had another try. This time Wheatley, and Tredgold, and Sergeant-Major P—— were the heroes of the night. The Borderers attacked on our right through the wood itself, and, taking advantage of the darkness, we tried a house-to-house visit. It was, as I said before, a pouring wet night, and the Boche, who did not expect us, was taken completely by surprise. A Company got in some dirty work with the bayonet; the Borderers got their objectives too. Then the same old game started again. The Boche popped up behind our fellows and gradually we got fewer and fewer. Wheatley was killed by a sniper at the north end of the village; a better or more conscientious officer never died for his country. Then Tredgold, his subaltern, had a fearful time in keeping his end up, in maintaining touch with the Borderers who were on the other side of the main street—to cross which one had to run the gauntlet of a machine gun—and in getting his wounded away. At ten o'clock that morning we got them back to the top of the hill, from where we could shoot the Boche instead of the Boche shooting us.

I always thought that we were too prone

to fight for each square yard instead of waiting till we were absolutely ready, involving fresh troops, and then going for the acres. It's not a bit of good asking stale troops to come with a wet sail.

Next morning I had a most happy shoot with Usborne. He had managed to get some wire up, and from our trenches we had a perfect view of the battlefield round High Wood. We made particularly good practice on the junction of an open track with a sunken road. Usborne got this Boche thoroughfare absolutely taped. And, letting the innocent Boche come gaily along the track all unsuspecting of evil, he would give his fire order so that the shell arrived at the junction just about the same time as the Boche. We must have avenged a few of our people during that shoot.

After some days of this sitting down in battle trenches and getting battle shelling we began to wonder when a relief was due, including even that most blatant fire-eater, the Bart. : for to my great relief he had turned up eventually after getting "wandered" from his company and mixing himself up in a side scrap with a party of Argylls. He was blown up and knocked out for a bit, but it didn't prevent the hardened old sinner from rejoining for duty with his beloved Don Company as soon as he could remember things.

Here are two instances of the way in which

wounds affect people. Brodie was shot while out on patrol. I had a good look at him on the stretcher and I was quite convinced that he was dead. He is nevertheless now very much alive though his wound will trouble him for life. Corporal Greer, our champion middle-weight boxer, came flying past me going down the hill. His arm was bleeding. "So you have a Blighty one?" "Yes, sir," and he continued his mad career. A quarter of an hour later he was dead: he had been shot in the stomach.

A rather curious incident in connection with the signal service happened to the 12th Royal Scots.

As is well known, the pigeon service is a very important branch of the signal service, and the greatest care is taken in handling, and general care of, the birds. These birds, while in action, are given nothing to eat in order to encourage them to get back to the homing loft as quickly as possible, where the messages are taken off them and forwarded on to the Staff.

One morning when it became necessary to send a pigeon, R—, the signalling officer of the 12th Royal Scots, found to his astonishment that one of the pigeons had laid an egg.

R—, who was very young and innocent—he afterwards joined us as brigade intelligence—wondered idly on what charge the pigeon ought to be crimed, as he put on the message clip. Was it a case of "scandalous conduct unbecom-

ing to an officer and a gentleman," or should it be classed under the less formidable charge of "conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline"? But the pigeon, by her subsequent conduct, added a clear charge of "refusing to obey an order" by obstinately refusing to leave her egg. And she sat up in a neighbouring tree, under heavy shell fire, while R—— laid himself open to the charge of "scandalous conduct unbecoming to an officer and a gentleman" by using the most unparliamentary language in his abortive efforts to dislodge the bird with brickbats and bombs.

Later on in the war the gnawing anxiety to get a Blighty became very apparent, even among the officers. They had one's sympathy rather than censure. For it was an odd's-on chance that one would be killed, and so the relief at being let off with a Blighty to those young birds was very natural. And that was not all: a Blighty meant relief from the everlasting nerve-rack to which so many of them were prone. But even a Blighty did not make it any easier when the time came to go back to the trenches again. And it is an everlasting shame and disgrace to the country that so many of these men, some of them wounded five times, were forced to go back to the front line, instead of being relieved by men on soft and cushy jobs away from the front.

I know of a case, a major who had dug

himself into an anti-aircraft battery down near Calais : his week-ends spent in playing cricket. And he was heard to complain bitterly at the hardship of sitting up late at night waiting for Boche bombers. One could not help thinking that he might have given one of our battle-scarred boys a chance at turn and turn about. For they were such kids, a lot of them, or else elderly fathers of families. And they used to inundate one with letters imploring to be allowed to come back when they were barely out of hospital. God!—how one admired them, those lads who won the war. A case occurred of a youngster who fetched up one night in the trenches and confessed to having obtained a week's leave from his reserve unit, after which he forged a return leave warrant in order to get back to it all again. Of course he was sent back. But that was the type one had the honour to command, and that was the type that gave Britain her victory.

We heard with unmixed feelings that we were to be relieved. What was left of the battalion came out and sat down on the lee side of Montauban to lick its wounds and absorb reinforcements. That night the Boche indulged in a terrific gas bombardment, which luckily fell short of us sitting out on the prairie as might young rooks on a high tree. The shells came over like flighting duck, and their whistle was not unlike the noise of whistling teal.

Two days later the whole division were relieved. Like Mr Backsight Forethought, in *The Defence of Duffer's Drift*, we had learnt a number of lessons. And the words from that great epic of Tennyson's would come hammering into our brains—

“God of battles, was ever a battle like this in the world before ! ”

CHAPTER V

VIMY RIDGE.—1916

WE left the Somme by easy stages, bidding a sorrowful farewell to the Fourth Army, who were kind enough to say nice things to us before we parted. Our losses had been heavy—heavy even for the Somme in those early days. But, now that one can look back on it all, one feels proud to have taken part in that great offensive, the first battle of the Somme. For we gave the Boche, if not the knockout, at any rate the first dent in his armour, a dent which finally brought us victory in 1918.

After a series of marches to the back areas we were shipped on board a tactical train. Now a tactical train means that troops, thanks to the kind-hearted railway people, are allowed to save their poor feet. Comfort does not come into the contract. It certainly didn't in this case, for several of us were travelling on the roof.

After some hours of this experience, which made one sympathetic with the sardine, we stopped. It was pitch dark, very late at night, and the men were asleep. A very young officer

suddenly thrust his nose into my carriage and ordered my battalion to detrain in ten minutes. In the pitch dark and with no light we endeavoured to comply with this somewhat tactless order: the result was that we lost three good men who were run over by a passing train. These men, harassed by Lewis gun carriages, had tried to break away from the surging crowd in the darkness—the 17th Division who were going back into the battle were admitted to the platform in order to ensure a complete mix-up—by getting out on the wrong side.

Then began the most dreary march I ever remember: nineteen miles for men dog-tired and worn with the strain of battle. Also the Jock didn't help much, for, as those know who have soldiered with him, he does not approve of singing; and, as everyone knows who has tried it, singing is the only thing which makes one forget one's poor feet.

But as the dawn came we arrived—in Paradise: at least it seemed so to us. Never had we dreamt of such billets: beds with clean sheets, bathrooms galore, and Madame and her most charming family all determined to amuse us—of course Monsieur was at the war. There was a most attractive village pump in the centre of the old grass-grown square, which sticks in the mind as the embodiment of peace after our strenuous existence.

Alas, we were not permitted to bask in these

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unaccustomed luxuries for long : only for a day, and then off once more. This time a tedious railway journey brought us into the Third Army, and we detrained at Dieval and stopped at Bruay for a week. At Dieval we were played through the village by the pipers of the Gordons with the 15th Division.

Bruay is a prosperous mining town—a fact which was greatly appreciated by our Jocks, who felt that they were back in their element once more. There was, too, a most excellent restaurant for officers ; everyone who dined at that pleasant hostelry will remember the little witch of a waitress who won all hearts, especially those of the senior officers ! It was too hot in Bruay, and we gladly welcomed the order to move to dear, delightful Dieval. Here we spent two glorious weeks, and the training was highly intensive—breaking in new officers and men to our conservative ways ; and shooting. For that was one of the lessons which we had learnt, that the men had forgotten the use of their rifles ;—the shame of it ! that we, hitherto through all the ages the finest shooting army of the world, should have forfeited our birthright in favour of a blasted bomb.

We needed complete change of company commanders, for the Bart. had gone sick. He always did when we were out of the line, for he hated training. However, we had a pretty good selection of officers to replace : Mabin

the Watsonian, Henry, that grave, quiet killer of Boches, and Jack Cowan, best-beloved of his men, to mention but a few of our twenty-four officers gone. So long as we had good officers we could make anything of the battalion. We all got thoroughly rested at Dieval, and it was a pleasure to see how the strained look, especially on the faces of the younger soldiers of the battalion, gradually disappeared. While here we received an unofficial visit from His Majesty, who walked up the village while the troops lined the road and cheered him.

Before the war we were undoubtedly the best shooting army in Europe. At anyrate the Germans held that opinion after Le Cateau. In bringing our army to such a pitch of perfection it is true that we had unlimited time, for a seven-year engagement means unlimited time. But we had very limited ammunition: we fired, in fact, about 200 rounds per annum. Now, while out at rest at Dieval, or anywhere else at any time during the war for the matter of that, we had unlimited ammunition, but extremely limited time. It became necessary, therefore, to modify our ideas on musketry generally, or it is more correct to say that it was necessary to broaden our minds a bit on the subject of shooting. So instead of firing fifteen rounds per day—our limit before the war—we fired fifty rounds per day as a minimum. And instead of firing coolly and

sedately in the severest unpractical manner, we fired as we would have fired on the battlefield, as excitedly as possible. In short, we produced battle conditions in normal conditions of shooting. In order to do this competitions were the order of the day. We had a standard which every man had to pass, and he had to shoot each afternoon until he passed it. When the men were duly qualified by passing this test we began the serious business of shooting. It had always been the other way on in the old days—all the time spent in footling, and practically no time spent in battle practice. But the State must be blamed for that—no pay no play. And if they wouldn't give us the money to buy enough ammunition we couldn't expend our little allotment in that most expensive form of luxury, battle practice. But now all this was changed. It is true that we had no range—but what of it? Banks were plentiful and steep, and sealed-pattern targets are not essential. What is essential in shooting is that a man may always see something *happen* when he gets a winner. You can ensure this easily enough by perching a jam pot on a platform of wood. Another thing we rather specialised in was to make all competitions for the best and also for the worst, so that all competitors not only had to compete for best shot, but also to prevent themselves from getting the wooden spoon. Our shooting

didn't improve: it was simply revolutionised, for the men could hit anything moving at 300 yards. And we went in for moving targets a good deal, balls made of canvas like gigantic tennis-balls and then sent rolling down a steep bank. Yet a certain musketry school situated far away from scenes of strife highly disapproved of our methods.

These narrow-minded old things who had never been in danger during the war, and were never likely to be in danger, had the impertinence to disagree with people who had bought their experience in battle, and had paid a biggish price for it too.

We said good-bye to Dieval with unfeigned regret: and then we were introduced to Vimy Ridge. For the first time we gazed upon those places of which the names were so familiar during the great French offensive of the preceding year: Suchet and Carency, mere memories now, with weeds concealing all that was left of those once prosperous villages. It was a quiet sector we took over, the home of battle-worn troops. I can't say it remained a quiet sector for long.

But first of all there was work to be done. In order to get it done our battalion did a fortnight straight away in the front line. The first two days were a nightmare, for it rained solidly, so that our trenches were pea-soup of an exceptionally adhesive variety. Also the Boche

raided to find out who his neighbours were just as we were taking over.

How the men worked! Timber was plentiful, and we took on the ambitious programme of U-framing the whole of the front line. And we finished it before we left the Ridge. Here we had our second dose of crater warfare; but Ypres, our first, had been nothing to this. There were two large craters in our battalion sector, not to mention a baker's dozen of parvenus, known as camouflets. Vimy was prolific of mining trouble, and the miners assured us that the season had only just begun.

There was a tunnel running along our front for over 12 miles, and the Boche had his as well. This, as far as one can remember, was known as a defensive gallery. The trouble began when he or we—usually we—attempted to cross Tom Tiddler's ground. When our tunnellers came there at first they found that the Boches were top dog. And top dog with the Boche is highly unpleasant in mining or anything else—for the under dog. So our men started badly handicapped, but undeterred they worked as only Britishers can, and soon a change appeared for the better. We turned up just about when this period of transition had definitely changed in our favour; the "boot was on the other leg." Thanks to those fine miners we were on top. But

there was a bit of my line about which the local miner displayed more reticence than was customary or desirable even for that reticent crowd. He would not give a straight answer about things on our left underneath us. So I followed him to his lair one day, and we talked of many things for some hours—of anything in fact except mines—and then little by little I got the men to chatter among themselves, and thus I got at the truth of the business.

As far as I could fathom it, after unravelling plain solid fact from the mass of technical talk, the Boche were under us all right and we might expect a "blow" at any time—a gloomy outlook, but "forewarned is forearmed" especially in mining warfare. For you take special precautions: a party is told off whose cheering task is to rush for the crater immediately the mine goes up, and to occupy our side of the lip. Imagine to yourself what it meant. This party had to be ready day and night, waiting for—an explosion! Then, amid a shower of débris, much of it large enough to kill a man if it hit him, our party must rush out to battle with a thoroughly prepared party of the enemy, because they, of course, knew exactly when the mine was going to be let off.

One of our best officers was actually killed in this way; the mine went off all right, but more on the front of the 12th Royal Scots who

were on our left, though we came in for a bit of it. So did the divisional commander, who was going round that part of the front line at the time. The mine cut a complete length of our front line trench neatly off and deposited it in an old crater, burying several of our men. But the Boche didn't get off scatheless, for some of his men got hoist with their own petard. This produced rather an abnormal state of things, for the stretcher-bearers of both sides were to be seen working amicably alongside each other. We noticed that a number of Boches who were looking over their parapet were wearing Red Cross arm-bands. This was too much for our snipers, who knocked over several of them. We were told afterwards by prisoners that this was a common practice among their machine-gunners.

The Boche had a nasty little habit of bringing up his biggest minenwerfer on a light railway, and giving us half a dozen at a time. We used to retaliate heavily with our Stokes trench mortars, which was rather like the contest between the flea and the elephant. One of the big ones fell near a party of us, and, had it gone off, would have left nothing but bits of us to tell the tale: luckily it was a dud.

We used to raid a good deal, and of course patrolling was a nightly event. We owned No-Man's-Land, and the Boche never made any real effort to dispute the ownership. I

remember a curious happening concerning a raiding party. It was a silent raid, and the two officers in charge were to cut the wire while the party waited some way back. One of them had been cutting for some time, had made quite a good gap, and had only a little more to do to complete the work, when, happening to look up, he saw a couple of Boche sentries not five yards away, very obviously looking at him. Walker was a cool card, and consequently decided to pretend that he had not noticed them. He went on with his work, completed the job, and then calmly walked back to O_____, the other subaltern, who was in charge of the raiding party.

What should they do? Should they go on? They decided to come back and ask for advice. Of course they were told not to attempt anything, for the Boche had evidently spotted the whole business, and he had only been waiting for our boys to throng into the gap when he would have turned a machine gun on to us, and so would have got a much bigger bag.

As the party came back over No-Man's-Land they were shepherded home by the kindly creatures who fired Véry lights for their guidance, but had never fired a shot! Poor Walker got a shell to himself at Arras.

The Watch did a most successful raid from the killing point of view, and that is the only

view in war. They massed thirty-six Stokes mortars, and concentrated the fire of all these guns for the space of about two minutes. The din was something terrific. When they went over, the place was an absolute shambles, for, quite unwittingly, they had caught a strong Boche working party in the front line. These luckless wights were found, scores of them, piled up against dug-out entrances to which they had all rushed when the bombardment began—pretty beastly, no doubt, but war is not exactly a drawing-room pastime.

We had the Naval Division on our left. They caused us some perplexity and considerable amusement, for they were very nautical. The Suchet River was our inter-divisional boundary, and this it was necessary to cross by means of a boat during the watches of the night. That gave the sailors the chance for which they had been waiting throughout all the war. And they took it.

CHAPTER VI

BACK TO THE SOMME.—1916

THE magic word "relief" flashed round just as we were in the middle of a plan for the capture of the Ridge. At that time we shared the Ridge with the Boche who, as was his custom, had taken care to own the portion which gave him all the observation he wanted. It was decided to kick him off. The Naval Division, ourselves, and a Division of London Territorials were detailed for the job. Had we taken it on there was no doubt in our own minds that we should have been successful, for the Boche had only weak and exhausted troops up against us. But it was not so to be; and it was left to the Canadians to do the work in the following spring. We went out to train for ten days, being relieved by the Canadians. Jolly weather means good training, and we were able to take full advantage of it.

While in our training area General Horne, who had just taken over the First Army, came to see us. We marched south for a couple of days and then embussed under French manage-

ment ; the vehicles were mostly chars-à-bancs, and it was really funny to watch the complete bewilderment of the French officials at the behaviour of our Jocks. The officials were accustomed to a seething mass of excited Poilus, which they knew perfectly well how to handle ; what absolutely floored them was the calm behaviour of the phlegmatic Scot. However, in spite of *contres* we got off at last, having waited several hours over time for starting. We passed through Amiens, and finally debussed at a tiny village, the name of which I can't remember, in which we were shelled in 1918. Next day, a Sunday—we always marched on a Sunday—we reached a camp overlooking Albert, and from there we could plainly see the statue of the Virgin, hanging out at right angles to its former erect position. The French had a saying that when this statue finally collapsed the war would end, but not till then : it fell during the summer of 1918.

In pouring rain we marched to Mametz Wood, where we relieved the South Africans, who were going up in their turn to relieve a tired division in the battle line. Mametz Wood was rather an unpleasant spot, for every night, as soon as one had got pleasantly off to sleep, Purring Percival used to start his monkey tricks. It was our first taste of high velocity guns, and we didn't much like it : also the Boche began to night bomb about this time, another disturb-

ing element. But our guns! The place was simply alive with heavies—mostly 6-inch hows., but a great number of 9·2-inch's as well. All day and all night they pounded away, and the Boche seldom retaliated: there is no doubt that the impression we got of the Somme battle-fields at this time was that we had the Boche stone cold. And I think it was really the case. One feels certain that had the time been September instead of the middle of October, we should have been in Bapaume by Christmas.

I was up near the Snag trench some time afterwards when a wounded Prussian Guard's pioneer was brought down by some of our fellows on a stretcher. As he passed us he said in English, "War! You English don't know what war is. Go to the other side and then you will find out." We were under the impression just then that we were getting rather a poor time as we thought we were being heavily shelled; but after he said this I began to make a careful comparison, and after some observation I came to the conclusion that we were putting over at least ten for every one shell he sent us.

During the next few days we did a good deal of reconnaissance. From High Wood we could see right away to Bapaume. Down in the valley lay Eaucourt L'Abbaye and Warlencourt, while frowning above the latter was the sinister Loupart Wood—a nasty nut to crack.

One look from that commanding position explained the Boche's stubborn resistance, and the necessity for using tanks on the 18th September, a premature disclosure of the greatest surprise in the war, according to some. And in war the greater the surprise the more complete will be the success. But we don't altogether agree. All inventions are mere flights of imagination until they have been tested under practical conditions. Even then one only finds out for the first time how many are failures and what big changes are necessary, to say nothing of innumerable minor alterations. And so it was in the case of the tank: the lessons learnt were of incalculable value. Admitted that the Boche was forewarned and that he could make them too; still we had the flying start. It would take him a year before he could have the plant laid down to begin building—and as a matter of fact he couldn't get a tank to copy until after Passchendaele in the following year. It is true that he began to experiment with an anti-tank gun, and it is also true that some of his field guns were well served enough on 18th September to have shown him their possibilities. But here we are at the end of the war with the Boche tank practically non-existent, and our tanks better and more numerous than ever, in spite of anti-tank guns.

The weather got worse and worse, and our

guns had not arrived with us, so we were rather handicapped ; but the winter was coming on and we were ordered to attack. Our brigade was in reserve on this first day. The Highlanders attacked on the right and the South Africans on the left. The former got their objective ; thanks to a horrible place called the Pimple, and also to the Snag trench, the Africans could not reach their final objective, though it wasn't from want of trying. One company walked into the Blue and was seen or heard of no more.

The rain came down solid, and life in the trenches was pure hell, for it was getting cold now. On one occasion the Boche made a counter-attack, using flammenwerfer. The Highlander's rifles were clogged with mud and quite unusable, and this was the one occasion when bombs really came into their own. I am under the impression that we were the third division to try for that cursed Pimple, and the credit of its capture belongs to the Borderers, though the South Africans had done most of the spade work. The Pimple absolutely commanded the Snag, and so, when once the Borderers got into this natural fort, they simply shot the Boche out of it. They were helped, too, by a terrific concentration of our heavies, the result of which we saw after we had taken the Snag. The 11th Royal Scots took this by a brilliant night

attack on the part of Winkle and his company, though the good work consisted more in guiding than in the actual fighting.

At dawn next morning we counted at least 300 Boche corpses lying at the junction of the Snag trench and the communication trench, which ran back from it at right angles ; they were our old enemies of Plugstreet, the 104th Regiment of Saxons—but what numbers of our men too, and not all dead. We rescued one poor chap, a South African, who had been lying out just short of the Snag for five days, calling piteously for water which the swine wouldn't give him. Considering the exposure he seemed remarkably cheerful. I wonder if he lived. We saw, too, a large party of South Africans at full stretch with bayonets at the charge—all dead ; but even in death they seemed to have the battle ardour stamped on their faces. They were led by their officer, a magnificent specimen of manhood.

Our C.R.A. was nearly killed here by one of our shells. We had repeatedly complained of short shooting on the part of the 4·5 hows.—nothing very original about that ! It was difficult to bring it home to any particular battery, because every group always assured us that they were not firing at the time we complained of. T—— was up as usual one day when our hows. were indulging in their

nasty little habits. Making us clear the trench he went forward into a sap; the next shell buried him. He was then perfectly satisfied that our hows. were shooting short!

After taking the Snag we pushed forward a bit on to high ground which confronted the Butte de Warlencourt, a great white cone-shaped mound about 400 yards away. That night we dug like beavers, and walking round with the Bart. after the working parties had gone back I got completely wandered. The Bart., as usual, was quite confident that he knew the way: I had no such confidence for it was pitch dark, and the Boche added to the confusion of our minds by shelling with vigour. At last the knotty point as to the direction of our lines was settled by our walking into our own barrage which had elected to fall at dawn. We were thankful to get back to our lines and to walk along the perfect communication trench which our pioneers had made for us during the night. The 9th Seaforths were artists at that kind of thing, and some real good work they did.

The lot of a pioneer was not a particularly happy one. It is true he was used to get part of his night in bed, a convenience which the trench-living infantry envied him. But he had to go up to work night after night, winter or summer, wet or fine, with no rest from it all. He wasn't a soldier, because he

had no time to train, nor anyone to train him. But he was a damn fine fellow all the same, and he put in some useful work with the bayonet—he couldn't have hit a haystack with his rifle—during the retreat in 1918. The pioneer battalions were a luxury which could easily have been dispensed with: they should have been absorbed into infantry when the question of man-power became such a burning one. No one could understand why they weren't abolished then, though, of course, their abolition would have put a lot more work on to the infantry. But, after all, the infantry must dig, and skilled labour is not necessary on the job.

The weather got steadily worse, and we were ordered to attack again and take a few more square yards of mud. It was at this time that Frank Maxwell joined us, our brigadier getting a division. A most inspiring person was Frank Maxwell, and though the conditions were damnable we were all out to try: but we were having a number of casualties from shelling, especially among the officers. Poor Winkle got one in the body from a sniper. For days he lay at death's door in a dug-out, but thanks to the best Field Ambulance in France he pulled through, and finally we got him across that dreadful devastated area—and home. He lived.

The state of the ground at this time simply beggars description. Huge holes as much as

six feet deep impeded one literally at every step. The delay-action fuse was not altogether an unmixed blessing to the side which used it; speaking as a humble infantryman I considered it an unmixed curse. And so it was; for what is the good of creating obstacles for one's own side, and excellent for the enemy, which was all that these graves did? They cramped the style of the tanks, too, to such an extent that we were unable to use them when the mud got bad. They drowned our wounded, they impeded movement of our guns and infantry; in fact, the delay-action fuse, except for special purposes, is an anachronism on the modern battlefield. Next year we got the 106 fuse, and then we ceased to handicap our own movements. For the 106 was highly sensitive, and even in mud made but little impression—on the mud. As a man-killer it was incomparable.

In our new attack we were to have tanks. Now at this time tanks made a most appalling din, and to cover this noise we had to produce a heavy machine-gun clatter to act as counter-irritant while the tanks moved up. But the 9th Division never attacked with the aid of tanks, either then or at any other time: on the very eve of this attack we were told it was not to be.

At last the weather proved too strong even for the British Army, more's the pity. Our divisional commander saw the conditions for

himself—up to our knees in frozen mud and no shelter in these battle trenches. So we were relieved, and on our way out we passed the Highlanders going in again. It was a pleasing sight to see them, for in spite of bad conditions behind the line they all looked perfectly splendid, and their spotless turn-out gladdened the soldier's eye. Even the old Bart. was impressed with their immaculate appearance. As for ourselves I can't say that we looked as if we had come out of a bandbox. We were unshorn, caked with mud, and some of us bootless. Everyone, including officers, had a beard of a week's growth. Even Frank Maxwell—himself always spotless—looked upon us with displeasure until he realised the conditions. And these conditions were—chiefly want of water. I remember getting a ticking off by one of the staff because the men were not shaving in the trenches. My reply was crisp and to the point. A three-mile carry over that swamp simply meant just sufficient water for cooking and drinking purposes—nothing for luxuries such as shaving. And so the order went forth, for the only time, that no officer or a man was to shave.

Never had we appreciated shelter so much as when we came out of the line that night. We had tents—ye Gods, what luxury! What matter that the tents were embedded in mud and that you slept on mud. It was shelter and sleep.

You could have heard our snores in Bapaume that night. Then by easy stages back we went once more, gradually scraping the mud off as we went along, until by the time we saw a *house* we were quite respectable members of society. Our corps commander came to see us and thanked us for our efforts, which rather surprised us, for we didn't think that we had done a great deal. But later the army commander thanked us, and then we began to think we were little heroes. We were sorry to leave the Fourth Army, where we were always thanked. And no one who hasn't been a regimental officer realises how much that is appreciated.

We bussed back into the Third Army, under English management this time—all good old London buses; and eventually we landed at a delightful village miles farther back. We received a bombshell that night, nothing less than that we were to furnish a guard of honour to the King of Montenegro; at the risk of *lèse-majesté* we wished the King of Montenegro farther than his own dominions. The Bart., whose beloved Don Company was selected for the honour, had a good deal to say as we rushed round breathlessly in the dawn of a winter's morning trying to beg, borrow, or steal bits of equipment for our trench-begrimed warriors. But we got them off in time, and the staff complimented us on a good turn-out. As the king is a king no longer, perhaps the Bart.'s account

of the show—or some of it—may be permitted to see the light. The old gentleman didn't see the guard of honour on getting out of his car, but he very evidently did want his lunch. He was, in fact, making a bee-line for the refreshment room when he was fielded smartly by one of the staff and forced to have a look at our men. The Bart. said he made some remark to him which sounded like Malayan, so he answered him in the same language. The Bart. did not receive a decoration on that occasion.

CHAPTER VII

ARRAS.—1917

DURING the course of the war, about the middle of November, when most of us had our bellyful of fighting, General Winter stepped in for a few months and gave us time to lick our wounds and repair damages generally: 1916 was no exception. Though the weather was appalling we made an effort to train, and it was badly wanted; for our losses in the second Somme show, especially among the leaders, had been heavy, and there was a good deal of new blood to absorb. We soon found that we had someone in charge with very strong ideas of his own on the training of troops for battle. And yet Frank Maxwell was extraordinarily reasonable and open to conviction; I don't think I have ever met a more lovable man. He was simply one's ideal of a soldier—courteous, kind yet firm, brave to a fault, and with that sweet reasonableness which caused us all to treat him much more as a friend than a senior officer. Had he lived, one feels convinced that nothing would have stopped him. For he had drive,

personality, and character, and, in addition, exceptional originality with the courage of his convictions. One would not have expected a cavalry soldier to know so much about infantry work. Yet he had far sounder views on infantry work than the majority of infantry officers. And, above all, he was a fighter, and he inoculated us all with his fighting spirit. It is not too much to say that he made the brigade one of the finest fighting brigades in the army ; a brigade imbued with the spirit of attack ; a brigade which was determined to fight the enemy on all possible occasions.

We were delighted to find that Maxwell shared our hatred of the bomb. "If you met a tiger," he used to argue, "coming down the street, would you shoot him or chuck a bomb at him ?" The answer is too obvious. Yet the majority of the British Army in the autumn of 1916, if they met a Boche above ground, would unhesitatingly chuck a bomb at him rather than use the weapon the proficiency in which had been lost to them for over a year. We always used to tell our people that it was just as dangerous for them to chuck a bomb in the open as it was for the man it was meant for ; because the radius of explosion was a good 20 yards, and the average thrower could do little more. Think of it ! Chucking a bomb like a blighted anarchist at an enemy instead of shooting him with the most accurate weapon

in all the world. But the men, dear things, wouldn't see it for a very long time. And it took months and months of shooting, with some practical battle experience to top up with, before they would admit that the bomb was not in the same class as a killer with the rifle. We were greatly handicapped, too, by the people at home, who forced their antediluvian views on all drafts, so that the wretched man had to be told on getting out to France that he had been taught the wrong kind of fighting.

After Frank Maxwell's arrival we never touched hand-bombs, and who can say that we were any the worse? This, of course, has nothing to do with rifle grenades, quite another thing altogether.

Hardly had we settled down in our rest area when we were suddenly ordered to take over a sector just opposite Arras. We marched in late one dreary winter's night, for we couldn't get into the town by day owing to Boche observation, and we were greatly impressed with the billets, which were far more palatial than anything to which we had been accustomed. True, the glass was somewhat scarce, and the rooms were distinctly fresh; but you can't have everything, and it was distinctly a change for the better to find Old Masters instead of oleographs hanging on the walls—and Chippendale furniture.

Considering that Arras was an isthmus with

the Boche on three sides of it, and with observation everywhere, it was notable how little shelling there was during those quiet winter months. It is true the enemy gingered up things in the spring just before our offensive, and he had given us a very unpleasant bombardment of gas shells shortly after we got in. The Watch were the unfortunates on that occasion.

The town had been tremendously knocked about, probably in the late autumn of 1914; nearly every house in a town of about the same size as Oxford had received the mark of the beast—some but a little, it is true, but nearly all had wounds to show. There were several cafés open, and we found quite a number of civilians. Why was it, one wonders, that civilians were always the unfortunates when the town was shelled? The place was honey-combed with subterranean passages, made, we were told, by the inhabitants during those troublous times when Spain battered on her walls. We got busy with those passages, making new ones and enlarging the old; for even then the Arras offensive had been decided on by the staff. Those passages were, later on, of the very greatest assistance, since they were used for bringing troops right to the front line, and even beyond it.

Shortly after we came into the Arras sector I was ordered to take over the divisional tactical school for officers and N.C.O.'s of the division.

In vain I implored and argued, explaining that I had been a regimental officer all my service, and so on. But the powers that be were adamant, though as a great concession I was promised a relief in six weeks. Naturally it is pretty beastly leaving one's own family—and we were a very happy family—to become a teacher, with all the endless worry of starting a completely new organisation with a brand new staff, and with nothing in the way of transport to begin life with. How I missed the regimental transport! But the division were awfully good: very long-suffering, too, they must have been; for the telephone was kept at straining-point by me or, more frequently, by Tommy Thomas, whom I had taken from the battalion to act as my adjutant. Tommy had a most ingratiating way with him, and I can hear him now holding grave converse with some senior officer in the Third Army.

About this time we had pretty well reached bed-rock for officers in the British Army. And here I want to put it on record that I did not hold that depreciatory view of our officers, who were, I considered, just as good as ever, for the following reason. Most of them had received a public-school education. It matters not even if it was a day school; the fact remains that all those boys had the public-school spirit. Now that public-school spirit is a priceless asset in war, for, as everyone knows, the boy learns

to play for his side, to forget his own little self. And when later he comes to us knowing that, he has learnt half the duties of an officer, and furthermore he has imbibed that spirit of leadership with his mother's milk. We must encourage that public-school spirit in England.

The place selected for the tactical school was a most imposing chateau. Really it was a whitened sepulchre, for it was unfurnished and bitterly cold. However that didn't stop Forsyth, my second-in-command. In a very short time he had every sapper in the division working overtime on every bit of wood that the corps could lay its hands on. People in the trenches went short of material—but the school grew apace. I think that when the work was finished the N.C.O.'s were even more comfortable than the officers. I remember, too, with pride our gym. ; it was a huge French barn and would easily take in the whole school, a consideration in the winter. I made up my mind that there were two main things which those youths were going to be taught—Shooting and Thinking. Everything else was to be secondary, and there were quite a lot of other things taught besides. But in the main the officers and N.C.O.'s, by dint of constant practice, were made to recognise the possibilities of their rifles : and, by means of constant tactical exercises, they were forced to use their brains, usually allowed to lie fallow till they actually arrived on the battlefield. We

tried to make the place a rest for those who had been having a strenuous time in the trenches. I was under the impression that on the whole they enjoyed it—anyhow they said they did. The course lasted ten days, and the numbers averaged about 50 officers and 100 N.C.O.'s. Most of the officers were infantry men. But we had gunners too, all keen fellows with whom it was a pleasure to work, and they took to the hand-gun like ducks to water. I received a most favourable impression of those gunners, and left the school firmly convinced that the Boche had made very little impression on the manners and customs of the Royal Regiment. The main good reason for being away from one's battalion lay in the fact that one got to know nearly every company commander and subaltern in the 9th Division, to say nothing of the N.C.O.'s, a knowledge which was to be of inestimable value later on to a brigade commander. What a character study it was. For they were a mixed pack!

At that time we had the South Africans, and they were the most interesting of them all, especially the N.C.O.'s. There was one bright lad there who had been a "snotty" on board a man-o'-war in Durban when war broke out. This young fire-eater couldn't stand the prospects of Durban, so he deserted and joined the South Africans as a private, and won his spurs and a commission at Delville Wood. He

was, I believe, very badly wounded in the Arras battle in the following spring : I hope he lived, for he was a brilliant lad.

The officers and N.C.O.'s were divided up into sections. Now, in order to get the best out of anyone it is necessary to play the competitive business for all it is worth. So every day the name of the best section was put up on a big notice-board at the entrance to the school, and it stopped up there till another section could beat it. Furthermore, each section was called by a British victory. The best section was let off afternoon work on the day following its victory, and section leaders were changed daily in order to give everyone a chance to run his own show.

Sometimes I used to wonder if our military system was not capable of improvement. Of course it must be remembered in mitigation that most of our time during the war was spent in the trenches or in battle : training, therefore, was the exception and not the rule. But here is a concrete instance of the numbing effect which soldiering has on some people. One afternoon I was present at the field-firing range. This range was a natural range with a steep bank. Near the range was a little spinney, and there was yet another spinney on the other side ; away beyond this again were big woods. As I watched the shooting—they were just finishing—an old boar suddenly broke covert from one of

the spinnies and ran across the top of the bank to the other spinney : the wind was blowing in the direction of the woods beyond. The section, which happened to be composed of South Africans, were told the situation, and permission was given for one of them to be deputed to shoot the boar—if he could. They selected a noted game shot in South Africa, a man who lived for months on his gun, and off they went.

One naturally expected to see some rather fancy stalking. Imagine my surprise and astonishment to see the whole section extend and march—*down* wind on to the spinney with the executioner in the centre. Of course, when they entered one side of the spinney the pig promptly broke out at the other end and made off for the big woods ; naturally enough, they never saw him though they beat the whole spinney out—*down* wind ! The staff of that school had a pretty hectic time. Alas, most of them were killed before the end—Forsyth while leading a raiding party, Fleming in a raid at Arras, Green at Gauche Wood in the South Africans' brilliant counter-attack in 1918, and Tommy Thomas gallantly leading his company in the last action in which the Lowland Brigade fought in the war.

The authorities abolished divisional schools in the following year. One was duly snubbed and humbled, put into one's proper place in the

general scheme of things, in fact. For, when talking about schools to an officer in charge of an army school, I was informed by this worthy that divisional schools were absolutely useless as they taught nothing, and so on, and so forth. As this particular officer had never been near the line for some years, if then, one hardly considered him a competent judge of results, good or bad, obtained by men who, whatever might happen to be their limitations, had at all events the supreme qualification of having come straight from the trenches, and whose work in consequence was at least practical, which is more than one would feel inclined to say of some schools we wot of!

On rejoining my battalion I found that the raiding season had set in with rather more than its usual severity. I remember a particularly successful raid by the Scottish Rifles. The great features of this raid were that all Boche O.P.'s were blotted out by smoke ; that there was no preliminary bombardment, which used merely to give the Boche timely warning of our intentions ; and that the raid took place in the middle of the day when the Boche was asleep or feeding, and the moral of the attacker is at its best. Dawn attacks are the very devil—everyone will agree to that : they are also usually unavoidable, owing to the need for concealing the approach of the attacker. But when it is possible to avoid, no attack should on any

account whatsoever take place at dawn; for it means a night march, which means again that at a time when men should be resting they are called upon to make the greatest physical exertion, to say nothing of the mental strain. Why is it that the majority of deaths take place at dawn? Because at that time our vitality is at its lowest: and yet we ask men to undergo the most appalling hardship and danger at this time, and furthermore to do it on an empty stomach! It is sheer criminal folly to attack at dawn unless this is unavoidable. Later on I propose to quote some instances of successful attacks other than dawn attacks, when the conditions were produced which are usually associated with a dawn attack.

And then, of course, there is the enemy to be considered—he was often left out in calculations! At dawn he is alert and ready for an attack, with his finger literally on the trigger; the gunners also are standing to if there is any chance of an attack—hardly the time to select for it. Again, after stand down, usually when it becomes broad daylight, sentries are notoriously unalert, and the majority of the men, having performed their routine duties and fed themselves, usually go to sleep. For soldiers are but human, and the war lasted over four years, quite a slice out of a man's life; and as the campaign drags on day after day, year after year, one becomes a creature of custom.

It is not the usual plan to attack in the middle of the day: as a matter of fact the Boche hardly ever did it—and those who support that view are the very men who assert that war has changed entirely, that even the principles are altered. "Always endeavour to surprise, mystify, and mislead your enemy." That principle never changes and will never change so long as there is such a factor as human nature to reckon with.

The Scottish Rifles found the Boche in the middle of dinner (they went over at 11 A.M., which corresponds to 12 noon German time, the time he feeds), and they brought back forty-two prisoners at a cost of five casualties. These men all belonged to the 104th Regiment, our old friends of Plugstreet.

Early in March the brigade came out for a week's training. It was bitterly cold but healthy weather, and it did the men a world of good. In order to keep warm every platoon took out a football and every man in the battalion had to play. Sometimes there were sides of 100 strong. The game was "go as you please," and all officers played; it was quite a good game to watch, especially when two companies happened to be hot rivals. During those days we practised the brigade in attack, using the formations which we were to spring upon the Boche in the coming offensive. We managed to get in some very strenuous days'

sports in which pigs (live) were given as prizes.

We went back into the line in the order in which we were to take part in the battle. That is to say we were on the left, the South Africans in the centre, and the Highland Brigade on the right. There had been some doubt how the South Africans would stand a northern winter ; the matter was settled by keeping them in the trenches all through that season ! They stuck it remarkably well.

About the middle of March things began to liven up considerably. Also the Boche began to extend his withdrawal, hitherto confined to the regions of the Somme, northwards to Arras. He evidently smelt a rat, had smelt it for some time ; and this had caused his primary withdrawal in January. For, had he remained on the Somme front he would have been pinched off by the Arras offensive. The Higher Command were very anxious to find out his intentions on the Arras front, and raids were frequent. One night I was sent for by Frank Maxwell and told that my battalion were to do a reconnaissance in force next day. I selected 2.30 P.M. as it was an unlikely time to attack, and also because we had a good deal to do beforehand in arranging the barrage, and so on. We had been in the trenches some days, and the weather was bitterly cold and inclement ; consequently the men were not likely to be at the top

of their form. A reconnaissance in force is not like a raid in which one skips nimbly over to the hostile trenches, bags a few prisoners, and is back again before the enemy has time to sit up and take notice. No, we were asked not only to go over and stir up a hornet's nest, but to count the hornets as they buzzed around! It meant not only breaking his front line, but testing the second line in order to see what reserves he had in hand—in short, to make him show his hand.

On our new battle front were two enormous craters. We assembled the two assaulting companies in these craters—they were Don and C Companies—while I kept the reserve, consisting of half of A Company, just behind one of the craters. On my way up "Old Bill," our machine-gun expert elected to come along too. For days our dumb-bell mortars had been strafing the Boche wire—and getting a good deal of stuff back in return—and we hoped that this very formidable obstacle would have plenty of gaps. Just before zero some of our old buses came over. Now at this time on the Arras front our buses were having a pretty thin time. We not only had ocular demonstrations of this indisputable fact, but some of our own pals were among the missing. It was pitiable to see our gallant fellows chivvied and slaughtered by those red devils: I rather fancy that it was Richthofen who was the leading spirit—anyhow he was top



EAST OF ARRAS, MARCH 1917.

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dog all right. In this particular case the Boche airmen, who outnumbered our people, drove them off at once ; and then the Boche proceeded to examine our front line. It was a supremely anxious moment. It didn't matter tuppence if they saw us when the flag fell, but crossing No-Man's-Land under heavy machine-gun fire is not pleasant to contemplate, and I didn't think it could be done. Just before zero a message arrived telling us to postpone the show for half an hour ! So for half an hour we had to wait under a really scientific strafe of heavy T.M.'s, artillery, and bombs from those infernal planes. Also our big pig (quarter to ten mortar) thought it a good time to join in the scrap, but the only result was to increase the Boche T.M. fire.

We were extraordinarily lucky, though—most of the T.M.'s landing just over or short of the craters. Poor Fleming who commanded Don Company was killed by one of these. There happened to be a telephone near by in a dug-out, and I rushed off and rang up Frank Maxwell to find out the cause of the delay ; I fear my language was more forcible than polite. Then suddenly we realised that it was time to go. Rushing to the nearest parapet I hopped over to see the finest sight a soldier can possibly see—the battalion going like a pack of hounds across No-Man's-Land under a hail of machine guns, gaily dashing forward against an enemy absolutely prepared

for them. On reaching the wire we found but two small gaps, and these we must cross in single file. Hardly was the first platoon in the hostile trenches when we were counter-attacked by the local Sturmtruppe, who flung showers of grenades at us. We were carrying no bombs, of course, and one felt rather non-plussed when some of the men shouted, "Where are our bombs?" in a reproachful tone. "Get up on the trench and shoot": no sooner said than done; and, led by John Willie Brown, up the men got and shot down the enemy like rats in a trap. For none of the Boches were ready to deal with the rifle. How they squealed and ran! Their trenches were up to our knees in mud, and, being unable to bolt down, they all got up and went back over the top. A crowd such as that at about 50 yards was difficult to miss, and very few got back to their second line.

There were two communication trenches about 200 yards apart in the sector we had invaded, and we now began to fight our way up these mud-logged trenches towards the second line. The Boche put up a good show and progress was slow. S—— was the leading spirit on the left C.T., while Tredgold and M'Donald did splendid work on the right. One remembers a wild Australian, too, who ran amok and went off on his own into the Blue after a heavy T.M. which had been

annoying him for weeks and which he had located. He was wounded but got back; I never saw him again.

These two converging attacks never succeeded in completely clearing the second line, but we got an identification of another regiment who were quite new to the sector, and so our job was done. We had definitely proved that the Boche was there all right and intended to stay. But we had a job to break off the fight. These fresh enemy troops behaved like men, and even when both their flanks were threatened they poured into their second line, and it was noticeable what good practice they made with their rifles, standing up on the parapet in the face of our fire. Then those infernal planes kept circling round and round us, dropping bombs which did more moral than material damage.

Our casualties had been heavy, for you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs, and then the job began of getting back first the wounded, then the fit men, who came running quickly back in groups of four. But that hellish M.G. fire stopped many on the way. No one seemed to be taking it on, so I asked a Lewis gunner, whose turn it was to go, to get his gun on to a commanding position on the crater and then have a smack at them. Calmly climbing up in face of heavy M.G. fire he very deliberately lighted his pipe,

put his gun into position, and then proceeded to take on the Boche machine-gunners. It was a fine sight, and incidentally it helped us enormously.

We lost that day John Willie Brown, commanding C Company, last seen far down the second line — known as Chanticleer — shooting down Boches with his rifle as he walked along on top of the trench. We lost also Fleming, dear little Lunn, and wee Sandilands, and one other officer whose name I have forgotten, for I kept no diary in those days. Everything at the time seemed burnt into one's brain, and the deaths of those gallant lads—yet I have forgotten! Will their country do the same? Sergeant-Major Francis, a gallant old fellow, was among the slain; and many, many others were killed, and many officers and other ranks wounded: our losses were over 100. We didn't regret it, as we all knew that the spirit of the battalion was enriched by the spirits of those who had fallen; and well was our belief justified at Arras a fortnight later. I think the man who enjoyed himself more than anyone else in that show was Tommy Thomas, but then the dear lad did enjoy life so enormously. He took it with both hands. That night, or rather just before dawn next morning, the Boche had the cheek to raid us. He opened the ball with a concentration of T.M.'s which blew our trenches to blazes, and then he came

over by the northern of the two craters. He scuppered a post which opposed him, but that was all the damage he did. We for our part had an arrangement for dealing with these box-barrage raids; for as soon as the barrage came down we side-stepped to clear the strafed area, counter-attacking as soon as we saw an opportunity of doing so. This happened now, with the result that there was a regular football scrum down the trench of Boches and ourselves.

The next night the officer in command of that company, who felt it was up to him to give the Boche the retort courteous, sallied out, and, creeping to the wire with his scouts, jumped on two Boches' heads, taking them prisoners. All had gone swimmingly, and now he only had to come back, but he was too anxious for more glory, and this led to his death, poor chap. Telling his men to stay where they were he went on down the trench: the men heard a noise of shooting and shouting, and then they themselves were attacked by a number of the enemy. They were forced to kill their prisoners, but got back with the loss of two of their number and all of them knocked about. We were savage at losing Mathews, who was a splendid fellow. S_____, now commanding D Company, crawled out on his own initiative in broad daylight, and, creeping right across to the enemy wire, searched everywhere for some traces of the body. But though

he stayed there a long time he saw nothing, and we hoped for a while that possibly Mathews was a prisoner.

It was a very brave act on the part of S——. It must be remembered that he had to go out under full view of a vigilant enemy who had been repeatedly stirred up by us. And not only that, for the dumb-bell T.M.'s were shooting at the enemy's wire the whole time he was out, and for some time he lay in their barrage !

All day and all night our T.M.'s were cutting wire. All day and all night the Boche pasted their hidey-holes. There was a comic element introduced into our existence at this time. This consisted of two official cinema artists who were quite prepared to do anything and go anywhere in their search for copy. I remember one morning, while the T.M.'s were firing, watching these two gentry taking photographs, when suddenly the Boche put over a covey of pip-squeaks. Our little heroes didn't seem to mind a bit, and went on working the show quite unperturbed at the proximity of the shells. They were very anxious to get first-hand "copy" of a raid, and there were plenty of opportunities. One show they did was a little too exciting for them : the Scottish Rifles were its protagonists. All their men were assembled in a sap together with the cinema operators ; suddenly, just before the show began, a shell arrived which killed seven

of our men and buried one of the operators. That was quite enough fire-eating for one day, thank you !

A raid by the South Africans showed us that we had the Bavarians up against us, and that they fully expected an attack. A few days before the big event we began a series of bombardments to lull the Boche into a sense of security. In these bombardos, which consisted of a creeping barrage largely consisting of smoke, the entire artillery of three corps were engaged. One used to go and watch them from a house in Arras, and I must say that it was most impressive ; and it helped one's moral considerably to know that all that stuff would be going over on the Day.

The 12th Royal Scots were attacking on the right with the 6th Scottish Borderers on the left. The Scottish Rifles were taking on the second objective on the right, and we were for the second objective on the left. The day before the show was Easter Sunday, and I never remember seeing the men so full of heart. On Saturday we had lost two splendid officers in M'Donald and Mason, the former losing his foot and the latter his life, both by the same shell. At 8 A.M. I walked up to the assembly position with Martin our M.O. and Loftus, two very old friends who were with the battalion when I joined — Loftus, the adjutant, so quiet and unassuming, but with

the detail of the battalion at his finger-tips. I have not mentioned him before because he never shone; he just did splendid work, and no one knew he was doing it at all. And Martino was such another, a man who always did his best to make one think him a most awful slacker. As we walked up I nearly put my foot on a horse-shoe which was shining brightly in the moonlight, and I put it into my Burberry pocket. Of those three I was the only one alive that night.

Two of my companies were mopping up for the Borderers, and they formed up in those same craters from which we had emerged on the 21st of March. The best part of the brigade actually assembled in those craters, and luckily the Boche left us severely alone. He seemed to suspect nothing: all was so quiet. Or was it a trap? How we wondered as we got into position. S—— of the one arm rushed out from their crater at zero with his Borderers and ran into our barrage. S—— said his opinion of smoke as a demoraliser, especially at night, was unqualified.

When our turn came to cross No-Man's-Land we found the most appalling mix-up of the division. Even at that early hour there were Highlanders who had wandered on my left, and also South Africans. Most of my people were too much to the right, and it was all one could do to get them back into their

proper places in time for the advance on our second objective, the railway line.

As we walked along we noticed Thorne, who commanded the 12th Royal Scots, lying dead. He was a fine fellow and, curiously enough, he had lost his brother, a wing commander, a few days before. Losses had been heavy, and we were getting it in the neck from M.G.'s on the railway: it was at this time that poor Loftus dropped by my side, knocked over by a machine-gun bullet. We made him as comfortable as we could, but we had to get on, for the attack was just due to start. Then down the slope went that splendid throng of lads, and up they climbed to the railway close under our barrage. Nothing could stop them that day, though there were Boche machine guns everywhere, and skilfully placed too. In some cases they were placed in tunnels under the embankment. In that advance Jimmy, who commanded a company of the 12th Royal Scots, was wounded for the second time that day. Part of his hand was dangling, quite a nasty wound, and he calmly shot it away with his revolver. In the attack on the second objective, where he had no business to be except through his keenness to be in at the death, he was very badly wounded all round the groin by a shell, which burst at his feet. Though he was suffering agony he refused to be taken down on the stretcher till all his men had been first attended to. So great were his

agonies during this waiting period that a sergeant twice prevented him from turning his revolver on himself. The doctors all told me that Jimmy was bound to die, but he walks about, with help, to this day.

It took us some time—we were on the left flank of the division—to clear the railway cutting, which was stiff with dug-outs and contained many Boches. We got hundreds of prisoners here. One of our sergeants who was inclined to look upon the wine when it was red, managed to procure, by means best known to himself, some Boche liquor. A Boche officer looked out of the dug-out and politely offered to surrender. The sergeant promptly chucked a bomb at him and got a direct hit, but only slightly wounded the Boche. I fully expected to see the officer represented by *x*!

Railway cuttings are unpleasant neighbours in battle. They are too well shown on the map, and consequently they make excellent data points for Boche gunners: the railway on our second objective was no exception, and the Boche punished it thoroughly. So we got well out in front and consolidated there. We were allowed to dig in comparative peace until two low-flying Boche planes spotted us. Those Boche planes received a pretty good run for their money, for the whole brigade was firing at them. And by that time the whole brigade knew how to use their rifles. But they got

away, unfortunately ; and then the Boche gunners shortened on to us, and we began to suffer casualties which we couldn't afford. Shells sometimes play horrible tricks on their victims. I remember seeing one of our poor fellows get a direct, or nearly a direct, hit by a 4·2-inch. The body shot up into the air like a rocket, describing a complete parabola. And I saw a tiny speck come down from far above until it was near enough to recognise the head which was following the body !

In the middle of our long halt at the second objective—we stayed there about four hours—we suddenly saw heavy columns of our infantry wending their way across the ridge to their assembly positions near the railway cutting. The Boche observers must have seen them too, for as one of the battalions crossed the ridge a 5·9-inch opened on them. The third shot found the head of the column, and that third shot must have caused at least thirty casualties.

At a brigade conference held at the cutting to decide on which battalions were to assault in the third attack, Frank Maxwell put the Scottish Rifles on the right, and we were on the left, supported by the Borderers, with what was left of the 12th Royal Scots in brigade reserve. Things were not too bright ; for the 9th Division had a big gap on its right. But the wind was in the best quarter, and so the C.R.A.(T.) was able to put down a smoke screen

which apparently gave the Boche the impression that we were using gas. Anyhow the result was that he cleared out in that quarter and enabled the advance to continue.

But we cast many an anxious look to the right rear during the first half of the battle, for we could see with half an eye that things were not going quickly across the river. It was bitterly cold during that advance to our third objective. And we all of us expected to have a pretty tough opposition, for our artillery could not possibly have cut the wire which defended the Boche system round the Point du Jour. But as we advanced the Boche fire appreciably lessened, and as we approached that formidable belt of wire it died down altogether. Even the pill-boxes seemed to show no sign of life. What could it mean? Some trap, no doubt, and we set our teeth and went for the wire. It was a tough job getting through the wire, even with little or no opposition, and then we saw an inspiriting sight—a mob of Boches haring away out of the trenches. It was too much for our fellows: with a wild view-halloa we were after them. It was too much for the Borderers, who raced us for the Point du Jour. What a sight it was when we got there! One could see half the world, and everywhere one looked were fleeing Boches. Victory, victory! Even far-away Monchy seemed covered with fugitives.

The telephone spoke to Frank Maxwell :
"Are the Boches on the run ?"

"Yes."

"Is cavalry good business ?"

"Yes, ten thousand times yes, but it must be done *now*. Too late to-morrow. . . . Why can't we go on ?" And so forth.

Then the 4th Division came through us. They had been marching all day without the excitement of battle to buoy them up. On they went and disappeared into the Blue.

What a victory ! We had bitten in 8 miles into a strongly defended line held by the Boche's best troops, the Bavarians. On ground of his own choosing we had trounced him well and truly beyond the very shadow of a doubt. We all thought the war was over—and then a sniper hidden a few yards away in a shell-hole shot one of our best officers ! He died—that sniper.

Looking back was almost as fascinating as looking forward. For far below us lay Arras—poor, beautiful, mutilated Arras, lying down there in the hollow like a dead swan. Everyone asked his neighbour, "How the devil did the Boche allow us to exist in such a place ?" For it was completely commanded from the Point du Jour, and one could see every movement in the town. No wonder orders were strict about no movement by day ; no wonder

we had been shelled when we skated in fancied security during the winter.

An inspection of the Boche dug-outs showed us that he did himself pretty proud in this sector; but then heavy gunners always do, whatever their tribe.

As the excitement died down I got colder and colder—no coat, and it came on to snow. At dusk we were relieved by the Seaforths of the 4th Division: but it wasn't much relief, for all sorts of rumours of counter-attacks by the Kaiser in person kept us waiting. It's bad business passing men to the rear when that sort of talk is toward: so we stayed. Then it began to snow, as if nature would blot out our handiwork. "Ugh, the cold," as we shivered in our sweat-begrimed garments. After some hours I went forward to see if I could get any news. I met a sergeant of the 4th Division coming slowly back with a Blighty. "Yus, they counter-attacked at Fampoux," he answered in response to my query. "And we didn't 'alf put it acrost them neither." That settled it. "Fall in—home." And we marched back by the light of the moon, for which we had been waiting, to Obermeyer trench, our first objective of the morning.

We got into Boche dug-outs and slept—how we slept! But the rightful owners of that filthy dug-out prowled and prowled around: we were all of us crawling in lice.

Tommy Thomas was acting adjutant: I thought he looked rather pale, and when we came to examine a little hole in his coat, we found he had got rather a nasty one, so he went home for a long spell, coming out to die at the end of the war. Then Tredgold took over the duties of adjutant.

And now my own worthless carcase began to trouble me: that infernal trench fever got me in its grip, the result of exposure and many years in West Africa. In vain I battled against it. Frank Maxwell ordered hospital, and I was assured that we could not possibly undertake another show for at least a week. So bumpity-bump, bumpity-bump, I was carried along over that shell-struck area in a blinding snow-storm. How the weather fought for the Boche in those days—and on most occasions if it comes to that. After a long interval I found myself lying on the road in close proximity to the heels of some mules. My own stretcher-bearers had vanished and had been replaced by others who knew not Caesar. “Badly wounded?” asked a voice. “Cawn’t possibly live, sir,” answered one of my gang in a tone of extreme relish; “got a perisher in the spine.” I began to grow suspicious: these men evidently didn’t belong to the 9th Division. But that horrible feeling of lassitude crept over me; that “Don’t care a damn if I die” sort of feeling which trench fever always produces. The movements

of this crowd were more forcible than polite : they evidently thought I was too far gone to matter. Then it got really too bad, and I cursed them with all the strength I could muster to go easy, and after that they went like lambs. But it made one wonder how it fared with a badly wounded man ; I was never to have the opportunity of undergoing that experience during this war.

The next day I heard that the 9th Division were attacking again at Fampoux. "Who are doing it ?" "Your battalion !" And here was I tied by the leg with this cursed plague ! That afternoon many of our people came in wounded, all with the same tale to tell. The battalion had gone splendidly but had caught it very badly ; the South Africans too had been severely punished. A message came through during that disastrous day to say that a party of them had even reached the chemical works, which were miles ahead. We could hardly believe it, but it was true enough. We buried South African dead whom we found lying there at the end of May. It was indeed a day of disaster for us. Smith, Turner of the D.S.O. for Longueval, Tredgold, my third adjutant in two days—all killed ; and many, many more besides. Not much was left of the battalion who were relieved that night and got back, what was left of them, to Athies.

The Bart., commanding in my absence, had had some miraculous escapes. Apparently the

attack was one of those which one knew was bound to fail: and it may be of interest to state that we infantry could nearly always tell beforehand what chances we had of success—or failure—apart altogether, I mean, from the mere technical knowledge.

This sense of premonition was positively uncanny, and it was common to all ranks. For I have seen, just before an attack which happened to be successful, the men, and officers too of course, all merry as crickets, though by every rule of war we should be soon going to Glory—“Getting ready to flap our wings,” as the Bart. used tersely to put it. “The moral is to the physical as two to one,” said the great Napoleon; but he made a mistake in the odds, which in the light of my experience I should put at fifty to one.

Next afternoon I crawled out of the best ambulance in France—it was thanks to the kindness of its chiefs that I hadn’t been sent “Down the Line”—and met what was left of my fellows. How shamed I felt to meet those men who had gone into action without me; it was indeed the bitterest day of my life. We in the 9th Division did not let sickness serve as a sufficient excuse from battle, and there were dozens of cases both before and after Arras of C.O.’s and other officers going into action with high temperatures. S—— of the one arm was one of these, and everybody remembers the

case of Old Bill L—— at Ypres in 1918 who went into action with the Scottish Rifles when he had a temperature of 104.

I was ill and depressed, and for days I had the feeling that everybody was pointing the finger of scorn for ratting. Anybody who has had that fell complaint will sympathise, for it is exceedingly depressing, and the sick man gets the most extraordinary notions into his head. Thank goodness there was plenty of work. R——, my new adjutant, of course knew nothing, but he was a keen lad and out to try.

One afternoon, soon after, Frank Maxwell blew into my office: "Get off home for five days." Protestations were of no avail. "Off you go. No battle fighting for some weeks." And off I went that very minute, feeling like nothing on earth; back again in a few days' time with the fever on me as badly as ever. Then followed three weary days in hospital, and, feeling as if I had just recovered from a long illness—as weak as a rat—I walked up to rejoin near Gavrelle. Here again I was collared by Frank Maxwell and kept at brigade headquarters for the battle of the 3rd May, a real bad day for the British Army. We were in reserve and got nothing much more than heavy shelling, but plenty of that. The Borderers, who were assaulting, had to make a left wheel and face to a flank—a pretty difficult operation at any

time when under fire : a sheer impossibility, one would think, in darkness, and it was inky black when we started.

A bad day for the British Army, the 3rd May. The Borderers did their job, which was what one would have expected of them ; but few, very few, out of those two companies who did their wheel and reached their objective ever got back. I think they were the only men who did reach their objective on the whole British front.

S—— of the one arm was badly wounded just south of Gavrelle as he was watching the show. They had a job to get him down—because he wasn't inclined to go.

A good cure for trench fever is to have plenty of work, and a week in those trenches after that abortive attack effected a complete cure in me.

It is always a good thing to have a village just outside one's sector, because it acts to the Boche like a red rag to a bull. He strafes it all the day and night, so that any who may be living just outside are left in comparative peace. Gavrelle was no exception. As we toiled back to Arras on the night of our relief we realised to the full what a tremendous bite we had taken out of the Boche line. We had left Arras in the winter : we came back to it a fairyland of green ; for that year when the summer came at last it came all at once. Going back in the train

to our rest area the men were just like children, greeting every tree and hedgerow all clothed in their brand new summer dress with shouts of wonder and delight. Remember, we had just come out of hell.

There was a complete new battalion to lick into shape. For few of the old hands were standing up. It took us the whole of one day to interview the officers alone. We were in luck with those officers too, for a real good crowd of Scots they turned out to be. It was here we were joined by the Heavenly Twins—though the Boche might have labelled them otherwise. These two were inseparable: always together in fighting, sleeping, or eating, they had volunteered to come to us from another battalion as they were not getting enough excitement. They got enough and to spare in the 9th Division, and they were with us at the great finish, though both had been temporarily absent for short periods owing to wounds or sickness. While out at rest we made the surprising discovery of a ready-made range, and be sure we made the most of it, adding several subsidiary ranges to the existing one. Old Bill, too, used to indulge in indirect fire with his machine guns until the civil population got restive. As a matter of fact he only killed a cow, but of course he accused the harmless infantry of the murder. In vain we pointed out that we had long ceased to be a danger to the public: Old Bill refused to be

convinced, maintaining that his calculations could not err.

We had a most interesting rifle meeting, one of the competitions being Lewis guns *versus* riflemen, and it was highly gratifying to the riflemen that they whipped the Lewis gunners, as good shots always will. That competition showed that we were coming along all right with the rifle, and shortly after we had an opportunity of trying our skill on the enemy.

We went back to the battle again in early June, and as we went through Fampoux to take over in front of the chemical works we got a pretty good foretaste of Boche bombing methods. On this particular night the Boche night bombers had tried to bomb Arras; but our Archies had given them such a warm reception that, thinking discretion the better part of valour, they had returned and unloaded their stuff over Fampoux, which at the time contained only the adjutant and myself. For half an hour they plastered the place with bombs, and there was no shelter in that village because there wasn't any village, only mounds of bricks. We had taken over from the 51st Division who had just previously covered themselves with glory by utterly defeating a heavy Boche counter-attack—none of your imaginary affairs when the S.O.S. goes up at the appearance of two men and a boy, but a really good effort on the

part of the Boche under a heavy barrage in broad daylight. The Boche got through too, which made no difference to those Highlanders, who just went on fighting back to back until counter-attacks mopped up the intruders. It was comforting to see the number of Boche dead lying about, but in that broiling summer sun the stench was too awful. We got them under as quickly as we could, but it takes a long time to bury dead when one can only do it at night.

The pioneers made an excellent trench through the chemical works, now a mere heap of scrap-iron, but that was quite enough datum for the Boche observers round Hausa Wood, and every hour or so the chemical works received a dose of hate. It was, indeed, no fit place for loitering.

The job given to the Division was to take what was erroneously called Greenland Hill, and the Lowland Brigade were ordered to do it. We attacked on the right, while the 12th Royal Scots attacked on the left. Some days before, the gunners indulged in a well-thought-out series of Chinese barrages. A Chinese attack means an attack which doesn't come off in so far as it concerns the infantry part of the business ; it is intended to hoodwink the Boche by means of a creeping barrage, to say nothing of machine guns. This performance goes on at different hours for days ; the longer

the period of preparation the better. And then, after crying "wolf," and after having got the Boche quite tame, one fine day the infantry go over with the barrage. The business must be well thought out, and it requires a deal of careful arrangement to ensure that some thoughtless person doesn't put it on extra thick *when* the infantry nip over; because then the Boche would at once smell a rat. We decided to attack in the evening, and our difficulty was to ensure concealment of our attacking troops during the long summer's day. For we couldn't get them into position without being observed by the enemy, who had all the observation points as usual. We got over this difficulty by making a series of small frames with which we kept up our glorified cubby holes. By this means two men could sit with ease and not be seen at all by the low-flying Boche planes, which were accustomed, in spite of our vigorous attentions, to fly over us daily at dawn. Of course it was Frank Maxwell's idea. But it demanded the strictest discipline and care on the part of all ranks to prevent the men moving about, for it is a boresome job sitting all day long under a broiling sun in one position. It paid us well, though, for the division on our left, who had not taken quite such careful precautions, received a good deal of the shelling that should have come to us, because the Boche had seen unusual movement in their trenches. Our smoke was

almost too good, for it blotted everything out completely after a few minutes. But the Boches were completely surprised and offered no fight at all as they didn't expect us, and, thanks to the smoke, didn't see us till we were all over them. We were very much struck with the prisoners, who were for the most part mere children : their N.C.O.'s, however, were the best type of men I have ever seen among the Boches. And these men complained bitterly at being forced to leave their regiments in order to look after such infants. Our right flank had to be refused as we were the extreme right of the attack that day. The Boche was always quick to find out and take advantage of any weakness in our dispositions, and refusing a flank is a delicate operation ; so we had to fight all night before the matter was settled to our satisfaction.

Rather an interesting night operation was carried out on this flank. A nest of Boche machine guns held us up during daylight and far into the night, frustrating all our efforts at direct attack. So we made the following plan. A party of rifle grenadiers was to crawl to within range of the nest, and then fire four volleys. In the meantime another party was to crawl from an entirely opposite direction and, guided by the bursts of the rifle grenades, rush the machine-gun nest with the bayonet, immediately after the fourth volley. As it was an inky-

black night the explosion of the rifle grenades acted as a perfect guide, and the result was successful. We got a lot of Boches with our rifle grenades that night. Our men were out to kill too. As a rule the Jock doesn't bear much malice when he reaches a surrendered Boche, but that night it was different ; the 12th Royal Scots put in some real dirty work with the bayonet. Also when a party of our men were digging a trench, a party of Boches in another trench about 100 yards away shouted out to them. Our men didn't trouble to pick up their rifles, but went over to them with their picks and shovels. There must have been some horrid atrocity which the Boche had recently committed to inflame our men like that. I remember, too, an experience of Wee M'G— of the 12th Royal Scots. On tumbling into a German trench he stumbled across bundles of Boche Véry lights. He promptly loosed off one, which as promptly brought down a neat Boche barrage on our side of the trench. This wouldn't do at all, so the "wee yin" forked out another sample and loosed off. A fearful cannonade on the trench he was in caused him to cower down at its bottom, while he searched for some less dangerous colour, then he sent up a weird contraption which burst into a string of pearls. Ah, that was better : the obliging Boche gunners fairly strafed their own trenches. Talk about Brock's benefit ! Every Boche in the parish

seemed to have a light, and every Boche used it. So did M'G——. But his pyrotechnic display was feeble compared to that of the Boche when his own guns were strafing his own trenches.

The pioneers came up later on that night and dug a magnificent communication trench under heavy fire. Just before dawn the Boche sent over thousands of "pineapple" grenades which were filled with gas. They didn't do much damage, but the luckless pioneers had another dose of gas pushed over them—by shells this time, as they marched back home after their nocturnal labours. Unfortunately they didn't notice it much and very shortly after took their gas masks off; and, as it was a long march back to Arras where they were billeted, at the end of that march over twenty died from gas poisoning, though they hadn't felt any ill effects at the time. And all the next day men were being knocked over without the slightest warning.

At dawn that day our work began. From our position on the crest of "Greenland Hill," we could see the Boches as busy as beavers making a new line. A railway ran through our line, and a cutting some hundreds of yards away seemed to exercise a magnetic influence over the enemy. We shot scores of them round here; for by this time we really did know how to use our rifles—and

the Boche didn't. The usual feeble effort at a counter-attack took place shortly after daylight, but we had no difficulty in repulsing it. We got heavily shelled though, and we suffered heavy casualties especially among the officers, two of the number being Clarke and Walker; also we lost some of our men and an officer because they went miles beyond their objective.

One evening just before we were relieved, the Boche put down a heavy barrage of 8-inch on the chemical works, which were just behind our headquarters. As a rule the Boche shelling was so accurate that one could stand within 150 yards with perfect safety; but that evening he grew careless. Our headquarters were a tiny shaft about 8 feet down, leading out of the support trench. I had just left this trench to speak to the adjutant who was down below, when an 8-inch hit the place where I had been standing, killing eleven of our signallers—all our best men, in fact, together with the signalling sergeant and the corporal. Two others, both badly wounded in the head, were hurled down into the shaft on top of us—myself, the adjutant, and an officer who had come up to take over. Then all was darkness, but not silence, for one of the men who had been wounded was shouting with all the power of his lungs. We lighted a candle and bound him up—he had a fearful

wound in the head—while R—— began to prospect. It was an awful squash, as there was barely room to stand in. How I thanked God that I had insisted on having a pick and shovel in that shaft, for I had been buried before. The air grew more stuffy every minute, and at last we had to put the light out as we were gradually suffocating. The wounded man was soothed into silence—frightened might be a better description.

After much poking about—“Colonel, we are buried alive,” remarked R—— in his most matter-of-fact voice. It looked—and felt—remarkably like it. The good work went on; at length, when we were all beginning to gasp like fishes out of water, the air suddenly became purer: R——, good lad, had made an air-hole. As the smallest of the three unwounded men, I was pushed up to try my luck at getting out, and, aided by R——, who resembled a pocket Hercules, I was forced through and up. Then I felt something warm and very wet. Working on with feverish energy I crawled through yet another of these warm and liquid somethings, and then out into God’s pure air. I could see now what had happened; we had been saved by Sergeant Hunter and the corporal, whose bodies, by lying across the top of the shaft, had prevented us from being suffocated by the débris. Very carefully we got the others out, having

great difficulty with the wounded men, and shortly afterwards the whole concern, bodies, débris, and everything else, subsided and filled up the shaft.

That night, after we were relieved, the Boche gave us a fond farewell with 8-inch on those infernal chemical works just as we passed them.

CHAPTER VIII

HAVRINCOURT.—1917

A FEW days later Harry Lauder paid us a visit and sang some songs, which were very greatly appreciated. It was an open-air show on a lovely day in June, and I think we gave him a pretty good reception. He also entertained the Highlanders, and the Boche was so tactless as to shell him during the performance. The weather was so delightful that we fixed up some swimming sports in the excellent open-air baths at Arras. First of all we had a quarter mile open to the division; some of us rather fancied ourselves at the quarter, but we might have stopped at home, for a South African came out for that race in a class all by himself. He went through the water just like a torpedo and left us all miles behind. We had every conceivable kind of race, including a duckboard race, in which you had to balance yourself on a duckboard. The Bart., who stayed in the water the whole afternoon and agreed it was well worth a bad go of fever afterwards, won this race easily.

We finally took on the 12th Royal Scots at water polo, but as we played Kirky, the Scotch International skipper, the 12th didn't have much of a show. A brawny piper of theirs ducked me well and truly early in the game, and after that we didn't worry much about the game, but continued to duck each other whenever one of us wasn't looking. It lives in the mind as a very happy afternoon after battle.

The capture of "Greenland Hill" on the 4th June ended the operations in the neighbourhood of Arras—for that year.

With the exception of odd reinforcements we had not been really filled up during the battle, and it was indeed time we were given a rest in order to refit. The division was scattered about all over the country in reserve for any Boche offensive against Monchy. The Lowland Brigade was about 15 miles due west of Arras in a well-wooded country. And since we were not able to get on the land owing to the presence of crops, we had perforce to train in woods, of which there were enough and to spare.

Now, as everyone knows who has given the matter a thought, it is the rule for all battles, or at any rate the fiercest fighting in battles, to take place in a wood, or in a village, or in close country. A study of history will convince any doubter of this indisputable fact. Yet we

never seriously thought out problems for wood fighting, chiefly owing to its being a branch of fighting which is a sealed book to the staff, for wood fighting is not spectacular, and it is entirely the province of the most junior leader. At the risk of being wearisome let us take the defender's point of view in wood fighting. It is a principle in war that you must have a clear field of fire to your front and flanks. That is just what you have not got in a wood, and moreover there is no time to get it, for in many woods it is a day's work to clear even a few yards. Therefore this principle of war might be violated, since the lack of field of fire is more than compensated by a most excellent obstacle to the enemy and concealment from his view. Remember, in the defence you are lying doggo, with all your senses alert to catch the slightest movement—and who ever met a Europe-bred man who could "make a noise quietly" in a wood? Also be it remembered it is not necessary to see a crowd of men (and they always crowd if not properly trained) in a wood. You merely have to fire in the direction of the sound. Again, you will naturally take every precaution to fire down any rides which may be in your vicinity. As regards the danger of hostile shelling when occupying a wood for defence, it is not a principle of war but a certainty that you will not be shelled while a single member of the opposition is inside that

wood. And, furthermore, your own side won't shell the opposition either, for the same reason.

As far as our experience of fighting the Boche in woods was concerned, the above seemed to have been his line of thought. It is a truism that one must needs get into the mind of your enemy in order to wage successful war, so here goes for the attacker's point of view based on what we knew of the Boche's methods. To begin with, your job is to clear the wood of any lurking machine-gunner: it is no good merely denying it to the enemy by constantly strafing it with guns and gas, because it won't have that effect, as we frequently found to our cost. No, you must first drive every single man out of it, and then hold it, though that, in my opinion, does not necessarily mean sitting inside it. In order to find those Boche machine-gunners—and all of us will agree that in some cases more gallant fellows never lived or died—we have got to beat it out, every yard of it. The Boche had a good time with us in places like Trones because we didn't beat it out, but went along in a series of blobs in single file, leaving large portions untouched, and, what was even more important, losing direction during the advance. Therefore we trained our people to form up in single rank on a carefully reconnoitred line, with an officer armed with a compass every 20 yards or so along the line. Not a soul was allowed to show himself outside the wood. Then,

when all was ready we advanced at the call of a bugle for a distance of about 25 yards, according to the density of the wood, after which we halted at the sound of the bugle again. It was found that bugles were the only things which could be heard in the din. All of us fired as hard as we could during those short advances, firing as we walked along by keeping our rifles well up under the armpit. Of course we could see nothing, but we filled the wood with a very effective barrage of lead. Picture to yourselves the feeling of the bully on the other side—always accustomed to have nothing sent back at him in wood fighting, but doing all the strafing himself. He suddenly hears a bullet hit the tree above his head with a whack. Another just misses his ear. "*Donner und blitzen*, the air is filled with bullets. I think it is time to be off," which is just what we want him to do.

For wood fighting is like a dog fight on a dark night. You don't see your enemy, you only hit him. And when we halted that hitting business still went on, for we brought forward our Lewis gunners to continue the good work while we organised for the next advance. And when we reached the edge of the wood we did not stay to admire the scenery, for the edge of a wood, so soon as the Boche gunner knows that you have cleared his people out, is about as unhealthy a spot as you can wish to find

if you are bent on suicide. Get out at least 200 yards, and, if you are wise, see to it that the gunner whose special mission in life is to cover you, smokes every hill-top or observation post within 2000 yards in order to prevent the inquisitive Boche gunner observer from tumbling to the fact that you have led your commando out into the open. Be sure if he doesn't see you then you will be as safe as houses; for he will shell the wood: it is to him like a red rag to a bull.

The writer has had some experience of wood fighting in West Africa, and on one occasion at least he is sorry that he did not use the methods quoted at wearisome length above. For a poisoned arrow in the hand, at four yards, without even a sight of the man who did the deed, is a high payment for experience, even valuable experience of that nature. Believe me, as one who knows the bush pretty well, firing with the rifle tucked well under the arm-pit as one advances, has much to recommend it in bush fighting. And as one doesn't hold the opinion that the gentle savage will welcome the League of Nations just yet, it is hoped that the above tips regarding the discomfiture of that slippery customer may be of use.

I had a sporting bet with my battalion one Sunday afternoon when it became obvious that they were getting a bit too beany. We organised a paper-chase, and I offered a franc to every man

who could catch me—I was one of the hares. The whole battalion had to turn out, and, thanks to a well-organised system of mounted officers, the whole battalion had to do the course. Apparently the men got restive after half the time allotted for our start had gone, and suddenly B Company made a dash for the gate—they were standing in a field. Don Company, not to be outdone, swept over the hedge, and the whole pack went down the village in full cry on a breast-high scent. And as I toiled along the hot and dusty road carrying, in addition to my own bag, the bag of a hare who had dropped out, I suddenly heard this shouting mass running almost to view. Luckily we soon gained the shelter of the woods, and after that we shook them off, coming in at no cost to my privy purse.

We also got up a very excellent troupe for the battalion. We were fortunate enough at this time to be honoured by the presence of a leading theatrical light; old J. D., besides having a beautiful voice and being a perfect accompanist (he had been De Retzke's secretary), was an ideal stage manager, or at least we thought so. Poor J. D.! It was a pretty stiff proposition to lick six untrained voices into shape; but he succeeded. The troupe consisted of Kirky, Sergeant Miller—our local Harry Lauder, a grand little fellow who was killed at Ypres in September that year—Sergeant

Mc—— with a voice like a steam-whistle and just as powerful, D—— the comic, and two privates, one of whom had played the piano at a cinema in civil life and was therefore promoted to assistant accompanist to J. D. The comic (D——) hadn't a note in his register, and no power of J. D., charm he never so wisely on the piano, could induce him to get one. He had a powerful, hearty voice too, whose dull monotony hardly added to the harmony of the choruses. But he had that priceless asset to the funny man, a funny face—one of those great big, ugly, cheese-like faces which he could twist and contort until his mouth would seem to have gone amissing. He wanted editing occasionally when padres were present. D—— had been everything, from an advance agent to a theatrical touring company in India's sunny clime, to a Labour Member in Australia. He had splendid powers of organisation, and—he had the best company in the battalion. For he had the three essentials for those who did more to win the war than any others (the company commanders): and those three are Character, Personality, and Drive. One feels impelled to add this, as some part of the above description may be actionable—and D—— was reputed partial to litigation.

We held our opening show in a roomy French barn. I remember a bottle of port was handed round to steady the nerves of those who

were suffering from stage fright, and we all had a touch of that complaint. The scenery and dresses (simple pierrot kit) were all made by the master tailor, and a very good job he made of it. We had a great ovation that night, and many other nights, for we used to play all over the place. I think the unusual exhibition of a battalion commander making an ass of himself had something to do with some of the full houses.

During that pleasant time out we also had a terrific military tournament which positively embraced everything. There was a bareback mule race for officers which had to be run off in heats, and there was also one for N.C.O's. The mules of the brigade were of the strong, silent kind ; and all of them could gallop. The course was about two furlongs, and when these mules really got into their stride it was difficult to stop them, riding bareback on a plain snaffle. In one of the heats my mule, a bad last for most of the race, went pounding on until the whole battalion turned out and lined the course—which made that mule stop suddenly, too suddenly for his owner, who sailed on over his head and went an awful ender, to the huge delight of the battalion. Then we had a bayonet - stabbing competition in which marks were allotted for the most blood-curdling oath as the bayonets shot home. Personally I do not hold with stabbing stationary targets because you never meet them

in war. Therefore we invented a target which could be carried in a frame by two men and which had a weapon, so that a man had to parry this weapon and then meet a charging target helped along by two men. Of course we had the usual things as well—jumping competitions, flat races, and all the fun of the fair.

A few days later we moved away from that pleasant spot and went south to take over trenches near Havrincourt Wood. Most of the senior officers of the Lowland Brigade went in *chars-à-bancs* in order to reconnoitre our new line. It was a lovely summer's day, and a most interesting drive for most of us. For after leaving Arras we went south through Bapaume, looking back at what remained of High Wood and the Butte de Warlencourt with mixed feelings. After quitting Bapaume—a waste! not a single house with a roof, not a fruit-tree left standing. The Hun, methodical brute, had outdone himself in methodical Hunnishness.

Living in one of these villages was just like living with a dead man, for there were no children, no dogs, hens, or signs of life anywhere. It was uncanny, and horribly depressing. Then there was acre upon acre of waste lands: magnificent crops of thistles flourishing on the best-done land in the world, and those thistles were seeding and consequently producing 100 per cent. of trouble for years to come. For by the time the French farmer gets back to it he

will find the dirtiest land in the world to deal with in his once clean, well-tilled acres. But he will soon get it right ; not one of us who has lived in France for the last four years has any misgivings on that point, for France has found the secret of maximum productivity, combined with absolute contentment among the land workers. They boss their own show. Consequently you see the peasant proprietor grudging every moment away from his labours, instead of straining every nerve to get away to the big towns where wages are high, leaving nothing but old daddies to do the work of grown men.

One is immensely struck with the difference in our own agricultural life when travelling to and from leave. Take a stretch, for example, between Waterloo and Salisbury. The number of fields lying fallow at any season is remarkable as an instance of under-productiveness. Doubtless one will be told that there is a most excellent reason ; if so, all I can say is that one never sees it in France, and I know the reason there. If you want the best out of the land you must put the best into the land, and the remedy is for every man who works on the land to own or have an interest in the land. This is all very obvious, no doubt, but let us copy France quickly.

Havrincourt Wood is about five miles from Cambrai, and on the high ground just south of

the wood one could see the towers of Cambrai quite plainly. Also Bourlon hit one straight in the face as being a position of vital tactical importance. Little did we think as we used to speculate on its possibilities what a part that name of Bourlon was to play in the deeds of the British Army.

Hardly had we got settled down when the brigade had to take over a sector north of Havrincourt Wood. The front line practically followed the Canal du Nord, and just where my battalion held the line the canal ran through a deep cutting, as much as sixty feet deep in places. This rather cramped our energies, but where you can't cross you can generally go round.

Now we were exactly opposite Havrincourt village which, standing proudly on high ground, completely dominated our position ; the village, in fact, straggled down to the edge of the cutting. In a few days our patrols, by going back along the canal a bit, were able to get down to the canal itself and so work up to the spot where our line faced Havrincourt village. At this spot there was a broken bridge. A few nights after we had come into the sector a patrol attempted to climb the opposite side of the canal cutting, which, at the broken bridge, is pretty well sheer. They hadn't got very far when they were overheard by the Boche, who promptly hurled showers of bombs down into

the cutting, making things so unpleasant for the patrol that they had to come back. They used to send over a lot of rifle grenades and heavy T.M.'s into that bit by the canal, and, as we did the same, the sector was by no means so quiet as one might have expected. For one had found by experience that during big battles, dating from the Somme in 1916, other fronts became peaceful, the only people making a fuss being the British, and in 1917 this lamb-like passivity on the Boche's part became even more apparent. For we were making him strain every nerve to meet our offensive, and he was forced to use not only his reserves but also tired troops flung in again. And the troops on quiet fronts were quiet indeed. Let those "Know alls" who criticise the Passchendaele offensive in 1917 and also the Somme in 1916, note that carefully.

There were those in the division who began to dream dreams as they saw this quiet front, ideal country for tanks and—acres of wire. To mass innumerable tanks at Havrincourt Wood, now that they had a most efficient silencer, would be an easy job. You should always endeavour to surprise, mystify, and hoodwink your enemy, and tanks would give us the opportunity to apply all three principles. For tanks could take the place of heavy guns, which would otherwise be wanted to cut the wire, and which would give the show away by their mere presence on the road weeks before they opened

fire. Tanks would make a clean job of the wire. Then again, we had a magnificent system of light railways, which could be used to "mount" a battle in the shortest time. Many of us wondered why the 9th Division were sent to this very quiet front, and many of us guessed in our secret hearts that it meant big fighting at Havrincourt quite soon.

We were wrong. It meant big fighting all right, but not until November.

One day an inventor came to see us. He had a thing like the blunderbuss the footman carried when great-great-grandmamma went to pay a call. This contrivance, the inventor swore by all his gods, would throw a Mills grenade as far as 300 yards. Now we had noticed just opposite Havrincourt village that there was a sentry under the lee of a wall: we couldn't see him, it is true, but we had reason to suppose that he was there. So that night the blunderbuss was taken up, and, after careful laying, was loosed off. It must have got something, that Mills grenade; for immediately there was the most unusual hullabaloo, and then the Boche chucked everything he'd got over at us, rifle grenades, pip-squeaks, 5·9-inch heavy minnies, and so on, all up the scale. I think we must have killed a general!

As before mentioned, the system of light railways in the district was all that anyone could wish for. But the vagaries of the leave

train were astonishing. On one occasion, very shortly after getting there, O——, our Roman Catholic padre, elected to go on leave. Now there happened to be a branch of the local light railway which ran by the brigade headquarters' back-door, literally. The staff-captain gave O—— minute directions as to how he was to get to Railhead, a place about ten miles off, so away he went on his war steed, yclept William, in the early hours of the morning. For William moved with dignity but without haste, and no efforts of the padre could prevent his making a leisurely meal off the wayside herbage as they went the rounds of their parish. I don't blame William for picking up a meal when he got half a chance, for he spent a good portion of his day tethered to some church or other "places where they sing," while O—— strafed his parish within. Well, O—— caught his train all right, and as the shades of night were falling found himself back at brigade headquarters, where the train stopped quite a while!

In some parts of our line we had a No-Man's-Land of over 3000 yards, with great scope for patrolling, and joyous ventures generally. But the Boche was too fond of sniping the individual with his heavy guns. The Scottish Rifles did a smart bit of work by going a long way out during the day, and waiting for a large party of the Boches to come into a post they only occupied at night. The scout officer shot one

fellow who wouldn't surrender, and brought another in, while his men turned a Lewis gun on to the main body, knocking out most of them. But things were humming in the north, and, as far as we could gather, were not going too well.

CHAPTER IX

YPRES.—1917

THE Ulster Division, what was left of them, relieved us, and we went out for ten days' intensive training in the devastated area, than which there was no better training ground in the world. We knew pretty well what we had to take on, so that we were able to mark out a very passable imitation of the ground over which we would be called upon to fight.

It is a long train journey from Bapaume to Proven, but the men were in great heart, and sang most of the way. As we passed over a bridge near St Pol they saw a woman ! There was a roar of cheering. Remember, none of us had seen a woman for a very long time. They didn't grow in the devastated area. We un-shipped at Proven in the wee sma' hours, and our guide recounted horrible tales of Boche night bombers, until we told him to dry up and cheer up. It was a long night march to our camp just outside Poperinghe, and we were all glad to turn into our tents for an hour or two. I woke up to find Frank Maxwell in the tent

with the astounding intelligence that I had got a brigade. So I was to leave the dear old division, and all my old friends in the battalion ; it didn't sound a very cheering prospect, especially as they were just about to go into action. The curious part was that as the battalion marched out my new brigade marched in.

A long talk and a short farewell to Frank Maxwell, the last time I was ever to see him on this earth ; and then came the most dismal experience of all—looking at the old battalion as they marched away. Was I never to see them again ? I couldn't, wouldn't believe it—and I was right.

My new brigade had been fighting for six weeks in the big offensive, and consequently they were being sent to a quiet sector. We were therefore packed off to Arras.

Another curious coincidence was the taking over of my new sector.

I was ordered to take over exactly the same bit of Greenland Hill which we had captured in June. I had been away all day reconnoitring the new line, and on getting back I received orders to rejoin the Lowland Brigade ! What had happened to Maxwell ? I was filled with forebodings, but there was no news, merely that short wire telling me to take over.

I left Arras on Sunday morning, only a few days after I had arrived there. During the drive

north I saw a single magpie: that bird of ill-omen made me feel more depressed than ever. On reaching the 9th Division I heard the news: Frank Maxwell had been killed two days before and I had been sent for to take over his brigade. Shortly I learned of the Lowlanders' great deeds on the 20th September. On that day they attacked on the right and the South Africans on the left, the Highlanders being in reserve. It was bad luck on the Highlanders who should have had the post of honour. But, at a divisional conference held to decide who was to go, the Highland Brigade commander happened to be on leave, and that masterful person Maxwell had no difficulty in bluffing the *locum tenens* into giving us the job. It must be remembered that the 20th September constituted the turning-point in the Passchendaele offensive, for during August and the greater part of September the British Army had made little or no progress, with the result that the Boche had his tail sky-high.

Our objective was the Anzac ridge, or rather the spur running down from the locality known as Anzac. This ridge was of the utmost importance, as its capture meant observation of Zonnebeke, and until it was taken the people in that slough of despond farther north, which extended nearly as far as Poelcapelle, could not move, since they were completely overlooked. The

Australians attacked on our right, and we were always perfectly happy with that sort of crowd on our flanks.

The brigade obtained its first V.C. on that date; there is no doubt, however, that many had been earned before. And many of the best actions have, perforce, gone unrewarded in this great war, where whole platoons would be blotted out after displaying unparalleled gallantry. But this was a clear case. Captain Reynolds of the 12th Royal Scots was leading his company forward when they met a hell of machine-gun fire from a nest of pill-boxes which had come to life after the barrage had passed them. A number of the company were knocked over, the remainder going to ground. Now to those who have experienced it, it is the hardest thing in the world to start again. Bullets have combed your hair, passed through your clothes, and you, panting and dishevelled, have dived into the bottom of a flooded shell-hole. Your ardour cools rapidly, and the more you think of the work still undone the less you like it. But Reynolds, before his company had time to cool, was up and dashing straight for the pill-boxes from which the guns were firing. I saw his kit afterwards; every part of him was punctured with bullet holes—his clothes I mean, for the Almighty was merciful to Reynolds that day, and he had not received a scratch.

On reaching the largest pill-box he pushed in a phosphorus bomb, which burnt through the screen which the Boche put up in the embrasure, and fried three of them; the remaining seven surrendered. His company by this time had come with a wet sail and rushed the other pill-boxes.

In this battle we used our H.E. barrage as was our wont, but it was hard work to convince other divisions of its advantage over the shrapnel barrage. All infantry who have had experience of both infinitely prefer the H.E. barrage, because they can see exactly how near they can get to the barrage by the burst on the floor. They cannot tell exactly where the shrapnel is, and consequently the infantry are very liable—very liable indeed—to overrun the shrapnel barrage. Surely that is common sense enough. Again, the moral effect of bursting shell in front of infantry, something which they can see and hear, is very great, and it has just the opposite effect on the enemy, who would much rather have shrapnel bursting over them than H.E. shells bursting in their trenches alongside them. We who have been caught in our own barrage, both shrapnel and H.E., know exactly what we would rather go through, and it is not H.E. And here is the strongest argument in favour of H.E.: fuse-setting requires skill and good weather conditions in

order to ensure that shrapnel shall function properly.

What were the conditions at Passchendaele? Were they ideal? The gunners had the hell of a time all through, but never worse than at Passchendaele. With their guns axle-deep in mud, and with heavy casualties among their layers, could the question of H.E. or shrapnel ever be in doubt? The shrapnel barrage is practically unknown in the French army.

Infantry officers also, the vast majority of them, took these gunnery matters as outside their province; they worked entirely in watertight compartments, and many of them positively gloried in displaying their ignorance of gunnery questions. The gunner is the servant of the infantry—remember that; and you may have the biggest bombardment that the world has ever seen, but it won't win a yard of ground unless there is an infantryman ready to step forward at the given moment and occupy that yard of ground, and hold it when won. We must get into the habit of swopping round a bit. Let gunners command companies for a month or two, but—and this is more important—let infantry command batteries for a bit.

I have gone into this burning question of shrapnel and H.E. because the 9th Division was one of the pioneers in the use of the latter as opposed to the former in a creeping

barrage. We took our stand on the virtues of H.E. and smoke, and we maintained our position to the end, gaining many converts as the war went on. And since one gets paid by results, especially in war, we can claim that our theories have stood the hardest test that it is possible to give them—that of battle.

Our losses, as usual, had been heavy, and I missed very many old friends as I went round battalions, but S— of the one arm turned up, more or less recovered from his wound. He spent a very pleasant fortnight out at a place about 20 miles behind Ypres. We were told that there was to be another battle, but we only got a rough idea of where it was to be. However, even meagre information is better than nothing at all, so we marked out the course and practised assiduously. We also had a great sports day in which I backed myself to run cross country against any in the brigade group. A franc was offered to every man who beat the brigade commander. It was about 3 miles over one continuous stretch of sticky plough—and it was a pouring wet day. There were some 600 starters all bent on comb-cutting. That race cost me twenty-six francs, but no more cross-country running for me.

The weather seemed to have settled in for heavy rain. It rained every day, and just before

we went up, the cavalry came clattering through on one pouring wet Sunday afternoon. An old dame in our billet, after watching them for a bit, turned to us with the remark: "That is the end of your offensive this year. I have always noticed that it is so when the cavalry arrive!"

Our first night was at Dirty Bucket Corner of evil memory. Next day we got into the canal bank dug-outs, where we were not so badly off: for people before us, in comparative days of peace, had made themselves quite comfortable. The enemy shelled us there a goodish bit, though not so much when we were there as just before and after.

The task of the 9th Division was a difficult one, for the ground was water-logged owing to incessant rain, and since everything was pitted with deep shell-holes it was a matter of the greatest difficulty to get along at all, even if you were absolutely fit and fresh. It tired you completely by the time you had done half a mile. The Highlanders were to open the ball with an advance up the Lekkerboterbeek Valley, just south of Poelcapelle, for about 1000 yards on a front of about 1500 yards—a big frontage for a brigade in those days. Then the Lowlanders were to go through and endeavour to win the main Passchendaele ridge. (In order to deal with that terrible name, mix up as many e's and a's as fancy takes you, then add a bundle of s's according to taste.)

The Lekkerboterbeek—and all beeks in that dreadful Flanders at that time for the matter of that—was in spate, and it simply meant that our men would have to swim, and—what about the wounded?

The Highlanders took over the battle front forty-eight hours before zero hour. Consequently they had to stand up to their knees in half-frozen mud, chewing the cud of their own reflections; for they had nothing else to do, being shelled freely and often by the Boche, and wondering why anyone could have been so devoid of intelligence as to adorn them with a specially designed mud collector—the kilt. Poor devils! We were luckier than they, for we started our misery only the night before the attack.

Now there were only two lines of approach for the whole brigade, for to move across country was impossible, though we were asked to accomplish the impossible, not for the first time, in this attack. These two lines of approach to our assembly positions consisted of duckboard tracks, which led all the way from the canal bank to beyond St Julien. How we blessed the noble men who had performed that splendid work, for it was indeed a magnificent performance, and furthermore it had been kept in an excellent state of repair. Of course the Boche had it “taped” along the whole of its length, but what would you? In the early stages of that

night's march we met the divisional commander, who, like all our divisional commanders of the 9th Division, spent most of his time near the front line. He was on his way back, and this good old regimental officer insisted on getting off the track and standing up to his knees in mud while the men went by, saying, "I have a comfortable dug-out to go back to," when we offered to make way for him.

Then the Boche started on to us with gas. As it was pitch dark it was impossible to march in our gas masks, since one could only with difficulty stay on those treacherous boards even in daylight. So we were forced to let the gas do its worst on our eyes, just keeping the tubes between our lips.

I was sharing a headquarters with J. K.— who commanded the Highlanders, since my job didn't start till his was done. St Julien of evil memory, for that was where we had our headquarters, was the storm centre of every area shoot by the Boche gunners. The place was stiff with our batteries, so when the Boche laid it on thick enough it never failed to knock out many men, guns, and horses. We had a large and completely insecure pill-box into which we all packed, sitting in our gas masks the whole of that night—a good preparation for fighting at dawn!

The Boche continued to shell our assembly positions with vigour, and Highlanders and

Lowlanders had a very bumpy time. Of course the Boche knew we were going to attack. He realised perfectly well that we must get on to the ridge before winter: that we could never sit where we were in that unspeakable mud swamp.

The first news that came through was from the right. The Watch had gone on with the New Zealanders on the right and a company of the 12th Royal Scots in unbidden support! But for a long time no news came from the left, down in the worst of the swamp.

The people on our left were simply water-logged, and no progress was made. The Argylls made a most gallant effort across the Lekkerboterbeek, in which many of them were drowned, but the worst business of all was a pill-box only 100 yards from our starting-point near Burns' Cottages. This pill-box was the first of a group which was swarming with very lively Huns who literally mowed our fellows down. Again and again the Camerons and Argylls dashed at it. Next day we saw five dead Cameron officers near the entrance, and hundreds of casualties. I doubt if there ever was a more expensive pill-box to our troops than that one near Burns' Cottages. Then the Bart. with the 11th and Innes Brown with the Borderers had a go, and eventually they rushed it by sheer weight of numbers. The New Zealanders were hung up on our right, but that gallant company

of the Watch were last seen far away on the top of the ridge hunting Huns miles in front of our own barrage. Very few got back to tell the tale of their adventures.

The capture of the pill-box near Burns' Cottages was the end of our offensive that day. On the right we had secured the high ground near Inch Houses, which was of great importance. But at no place on our front did we get farther than a distance of 500 yards and stay there, for the gallant effort of the Watch was wasted. Yet we had gone farther than anyone else on that fateful day of the 12th October.

Next day we took over the whole line from the Highlanders, and soon we found that our hammer-blows had not been entirely without effect on the Boche. For the day following we were able to advance our line by taking several pill-boxes in the vicinity of Burns' Cottages, which gave little trouble to us in their taking. But our casualties! For the two brigades it must have been well over 2000, and so many of them killed.

Owing to the flooded shell-holes it was an odds-on chance that a wounded man would be drowned. Poor Johnstone of the 11th was a case in point: he had been with us since the start and he had won his commission by sheer merit. O'N——, the Highlanders' Roman Catholic padre, was very badly wounded while tending

wounded near Burns' Cottages. He was another old original. When last heard of he was met on board a man-o'-war to which he had been transferred in spite of his remonstrances and prayers to be returned to his beloved Camerons. But he insisted on wearing the Cameron trews and glengarry !

During the next few days the front line became comparatively peaceful, simply because the Boche had no idea where we had got to. But St Julien ! Many a time one has walked down that road, and one's stick would come out of the mud a dull red wherever one liked to put it in. Some of those army batteries were in for as long as six weeks, with no shelter except a few small pill-boxes, and exposed not only to the inclement weather but to those periodic storms of lead in which the Boche used to indulge and which are known as area shoots. For an Army Brigade was an orphan ; or at least it had been abducted from its parents, the division, as a result of the Somme battles.

For those who do not know, every division was originally provided with three brigades of Royal Field Artillery. Now it was often necessary during the Somme fighting to keep the gunners in when the infantry were sent back to rest. And one can only suppose, knowing nothing of the reason, real or otherwise, that the staff thought things might work

out better if they pinched off permanently a brigade from each division.

These Army Brigades were conspicuous by their discipline for the most part. But they had a grievance, or several ; what man's child has not ? And it struck me that they used to do rather more than their fair share of battle fighting. Again, we used to know every man, horse, and gun of our own gunners. For they had been with us for years. But in the case of the Army Brigade we never knew them, and, what one ventures to think of more importance, they never really knew us or our requirements. Infantry are a strange crowd ; some like one thing and some another, but it is better to give them what they want, O gunners, not what you want. It saves a deal of time, and many valuable lives.

Every division has its own views on subjects connected with war. These views are merely matters of detail, for everyone is unanimous about principles. But unless one belongs to the family, as it were, one cannot share in the tone of the division. A mutual admiration society between gunners and infantry is essential, and it is not too much to say that it always existed in every division. But strangers, especially Britishers, do not instinctively join such societies. Both sides like to winter and summer each other before cementing the bonds

of friendship. So that was one very strong reason against Army Brigades.

We in our turn were relieved by South Africa, and two days later D—, who commanded the South Africans, got that poisonous pill-box which we owned at St Julien brought tumbling about his ears. I found this out on going to relieve him for yet another tour in that line.

The first night in our new pill-box was exciting, as we managed to set it on fire. Of course the Boche joined in the fun; but we succeeded in getting the fire out with the loss of all our grub. After a few days of undiluted misery, when it poured all day and all night without ceasing, we were relieved by the Naval Division, who impressed us greatly by their nautical terms. It was disappointing to find that their brigade commander was not addressed as "Admiral."

On getting back to our very comfortable dug-out in the canal bank I found a wire telling me of the arrival of a daughter, born during the battle. She was asking to be called Ypres, absolutely asking for it, but with great magnanimity I let her off!

CHAPTER X

GAUCHE AND GOUZEAUCOURT.—1918

By the end of 1917 the division had been in all parts of the British front except that bit on the coast. As a matter of fact the British only held the coastal sector from about June to December, so we were lucky to go there. We got well bombed as we entrained at Irish Farm, well known to dwellers on the canal bank, and we were bombed again at Poperinghe. Then by easy stages we trekked north to a smart seaside resort near Dunkirk. The Highlanders had gone before us and went into the line at once, and later on the South Africans followed them. But we were lucky ; for we stopped the whole time at our little place by the sea.

Malo Les Bains was a typical continental watering-place with a fine broad esplanade, suitable as a parade ground when the tide was in ; an enormous hotel, suitable for billets ; and fine sands, suitable for training and polo. But we were not allowed to use that hotel because the proprietor objected ! However, it was some consolation afterwards to see our French allies,

who relieved us, pouring into the place in their muddy garments (they had just come out of the trenches) in spite of voluble protestations on the part of the gentleman who had refused us admission. Moreover, we should have paid a handsome billet allowance—not so the French. No wonder the natives preferred our occupation to that of their own countrymen during war time.

The Boche used to bomb Dunkirk every night without fail; luckily for us Malo was considered too insignificant for him—though Malo had been bombed on the very first night of the Fourth Army Headquarters' occupation! They shifted their quarters, and the Boche never repeated the performance.

There is only one place to train on during the winter—and that is sand-dunes, for everywhere else is mud, and plenty of it; whereas on sand, even when it is actually raining the going is clean enough. With the sea in close proximity there is no difficulty in fixing up battle shooting, the only form of shooting a trained rifleman should be taught; for one can always see a boat coming and stop the firing for a bit. But the theory that a miss is as good as a mile did not appear to satisfy the Navy, whose patrol boats seemed to display an unreasonable objection to bullets whistling about their ears. I must admit that a ride down the beach on any working day of the week, when

the Lowlanders had really got into their stride at shooting, and when every platoon commander had his own pet range—and sea-gull—to shoot at, was an exciting experience. It was just like a battlefield!

The Stokes mortar expert, too, had designs on our persons, but it was quite a long time before we discovered his extreme partiality for shooting out to sea. The discovery was due to the unwonted keenness of the trench mortar personnel, who dashed fearlessly into the waves and retrieved quite a useful "catch." O—, the priest, had a narrow escape—two, in fact. He was accustomed to bathe when the sun was up. One day some of his flock gingered him up with a Stokes barrage, which, to quote an ancient song, "Fairly put the wind up Father." Another time, so he vowed, a Belgian plane flying low made at him with a machine gun. This frightened him so much that he never ventured to bathe again.

The sea gave us grand opportunities for practical tests of that much-abused term, machine-gun barrage, for, by standing on a high sand-dune one could check every little detail. And our complaint that machine-gunned are not infallible, but are liable to make mistakes like ordinary mortals, was not unfounded.

Rumours presently began to circulate that

we were shortly moving by march route down south, so the men were encouraged to soak their feet daily in the sea. It made all the difference to the marching of the brigade shortly afterwards; and later, when we held the line during those trying winter months, I think our comparative immunity from trench feet was due to the hardening process to which they had been subjected at Malo.

We were sorry to leave the sea, but extremely glad to get away from Flanders in winter. For a week we marched south, passing Bergues, a quaint old moat-encircled town with its famous carillon. The weather was kind too. Near St Omer, at Helfaut, I revisited a small estaminet where I had been billeted with my territorial battalion during the first battle of Ypres in 1914. The lady of the Hoos used to cook our rations, and had cried bitterly when we parted. She remembered us all perfectly, and wept afresh at hearing that so many of her friends had "gone West." Towards the end of our trek we entered broken country, a country of hills and valleys steep enough to make the shooting enthusiasts' mouths water. On reaching our destination we found ourselves in the best billet we had ever dreamt of. The Chateau of Torcy is a truly remarkable place, and its owner a truly remarkable man. He spoke English perfectly though he had never been

in England. He kept every conceivable kind of pet, and he had some excellent shooting. The first night we were there he gave us a most sumptuous repast which he called tea; every kind of pre-war cake graced the table. His views on politics were decidedly anti-Republican, in fact, he was a rabid Royalist. "Why don't the Boches bomb Paris?" he would ask. "Because they daren't risk killing one of their own countrymen." According to him all Republicans were tarred with the same brush, traitors to their country. His hatred of the profiteer and the *embusqué* gentlemen generally was intensified by the fact that he had just lost his only son, a lieutenant of Chasseurs, who had fallen at the head of his men in battle.

My bedroom was a cosy affair, for the whole room was quilted—a very comfortable billet; far too comfortable for a long residence: we knew that as soon as we saw it. The battalion scouts had a most strenuous time hunting pigs. They were promised a large reward if they could slay a pig, of which there were many in the big woods. They didn't get any pigs, but they did get a lot of useful training.

Just after we reached this area the news came in about our Cambrai offensive. The first wire was so splendid that we thought Valenciennes must go; but there was a long pause, with nothing further. No news was

always bad news in this war, and some of the knowing ones amongst us shook their heads and prophesied that our bolt was shot; but we in our turn received a bolt from the blue. We were celebrating St Andrew's night when the wire came in telling us to pack off at once for Péronne. That was all right. We were doubtless being shoved in as reinforcements. Then sinister rumours, vague at first but gradually becoming more definite, began to filter through that something had gone wrong. And here it should be noted that no one outside the actual business had the vaguest notion of that approaching Cambrai offensive. The secret was indeed well kept, except by the people at home. One of these chatters told an officer of ours who was on his way up to London all about the whole plan, though the officer was a perfect stranger to her. The soldiers could not have told her, for the soldiers didn't know. If only women could have been made to realise the number of deaths for which they were indirectly responsible through talking in public of things about which they should never have been told, it would have helped the war along a bit.

It was miserably cold in the train on that long journey southwards, for the weather had changed and a biting nor'-easter chilled us to the bone as we sat in our very draughty

carriages. On reaching Péronne we heard the worst; the Boches had counter-attacked just south of our offensive, and had succeeded in penetrating our line.

We were shoved in at once to relieve the Guards and cavalry who had, together with the tanks, retrieved a very critical situation. All three brigades went in: Lowlanders on the right with their centre about Gauche Wood, South Africans in the centre, and Highlanders on the left, just short of Gonnelleieu, and just in front of Gouzeaucourt. Gauche Wood—presumably so called because it resembled the shape of the left hand with the tops of the fingers and the thumb chopped off—had been the scene of a glorious fight. As one went over the ground, at the sight of those dead Guardsmen in the wood, and the tanks all littering the countryside, one could visualise one of the finest counter-attacks which have ever taken place: no gallery display (except to the enemy) in this counter-attack, for the Boches were through; they had achieved such an astounding success that they must have hesitated what to do next. And as they hesitated, those splendid Guardsmen and tanks together came charging up and then down the slope. It must have been such a sight as Blackmore would have us realise in *Lorna Doone*, when the young Doones came charging down the valley intent

on selling their lives to the very highest bidder. The tanks, too, must have been handled with the very highest tactical skill, for every little fold in the ground had been utilised to its fullest extent in order to conceal their movements. We could tell that by the tracks. And in the tanks one found complete crews, all dead.

It was a magnificent performance. The cavalry had obviously charged straight at the machine guns, for one found little groups of dead horses and men mown down like standing corn. I, for one, will never forget so long as I live the impression I received of such an example of British gallantry on a stricken field. Remember the conditions. The Guards had just been relieved after terrific fighting round Bourlon Wood. They were on their way back to rest when they got the order to switch on and stop the victorious enemy. The tanks had packed up on the train near Fins, in some cases, when the news came. The cavalry had been heavily engaged, and their horses were in no condition to stand another fight; but all three went boldly at it, stale men and stale horses against fresh troops flushed with success—their first success against us for years. Can we be blamed for sometimes showing our pride of race, pride at belonging to such an army? The tunnellers, many

of them old soldiers, must not be forgotten either, for they fought a great fight that day.

Gauche Wood was not healthy, because the Boche gave it an area shoot about ten times a day for the first three weeks we were there; later he reduced his allowance of hate: he always strafed anything against which he had failed, the Boche. We dug furiously. We burrowed into that chalk like beavers, working day and night shifts to get our people shelter from shelling and from the weather. Finally we had mined dug-outs even for company headquarters. There was a sunken road only 700 yards behind the line. With the help of tunnellers we soon had a place where four companies could sleep, miles under the hill. Our brigade headquarters were in yet another sunken road, and here again we burrowed like beavers. The 90th Company R.E. under B—— were our great standby. For most of them were miners, and with the aid of our working parties they used to do anything which the tunnellers couldn't cope with. For everyone was windy; a perfect gale was raging everywhere at the coming Boche offensive. Wherever there might happen to be a good position that position was promptly undermined for dug-outs to hold the garrison which, sheltered from the hostile bombardment, would be able to man their trenches in time to repel the enemy assault.

But we were not content with undermining the countryside behind us. Every effort was made to get shelter for those even in the front line. R——, one of the sappers, invented a cosy little shelter which could be fitted in the parapet of the trenches, and which was pip-squeak-proof, and we soon had these shelters along the whole brigade front.

The officers and men were really magnificent in their keenness. Think of it; most of us were doing our fourth winter, which we had confidently expected to spend at home, and here we were, flung out into that dreary waste with no means of taking our minds off things for a bit; for estaminets, women and children, and sundry other delights dear to the hearts of soldiers, were not. I remember one day escorting a very famous general up to Chapel Hill, from which vantage-point we had an uninterrupted view of my kingdom. For a long time he looked in silence, but as he turned away he remarked, "What a horrible country."

Our trouble lay in the roads, or the lack of them. We had not a single road in the sector. But one day while reconnoitring we found an old light railway which ran to within 3000 yards of our line. We immediately roped in the sappers, stole all the rails we wanted, and—the North British Railway, 2000 yards long, with a staff of six and rolling stock (stolen) of four trucks, was the result. Eventually we got our branch line

connected up with the light railway system away back, so that any train which felt in the humour might run quite close up behind the line.

But that waste was not particularly healthy. For there were any number of Boche guns about—remember it was a battle front—and the Boche gunner had a nasty little habit of sniping with 5·9-inches, a dirty trick. He didn't confine his attention to mere shelling either, for, thinking that we were a bit too close to Gonnelleu to be pleasant, he attacked us after a hellish bombardment of T.M.'s. But though he had blown many of them sky-high there were still enough of the old Argylls left to give him a very warm reception. As the remains of the attackers dragged themselves back to their trenches, they must have cursed their luck at having bumped into one of the toughest crowd in the British Army.

The left of the Highland Brigade was the joint of two armies, the third and the fifth. Now joints are always weak, however good the material may be which is used for the soldering; and that joint was to be a cause of the gravest anxiety to us, as I will endeavour to explain later on. We found, too, that it was good to have a Boche Army joint opposite our own front. The German Army joint was a veritable No-Man's-Land for a few hundred yards in the summer of 1918, when old Sixt von Arnim commanded the Fourth Army and some person of no fame commanded, if my

memory serves me, the Sixth Army. This joint was opposite us. Von Arnim's crowd attended to every little detail of their line up to its extreme boundary ; not so the other lads.

We found it difficult to keep the spark of military efficiency burning at all brightly, now that we had all become hewers of wood and diggers of trenches. Yet we kept it going by means of a brigade school. Now brigade schools were strictly *taboo*, at least a much betabbed officer nearly had a fit when I showed him ours —of course the argument is that corps and army schools do all that is necessary. They hardly touched our trouble. These corps and army schools were excellent places for a rest from the line, but we could not send sufficient men to them to cope with the young N.C.O. For trench life will never teach the young N.C.O. the rudiments of his job, and so we had to teach him behind the line.

We also had a Lewis gun school, and, most important of all, a school for the undergrown lad—the timid souls we used to call them—the boy who was young for his age as a result of bad nourishment while a baby. Our aim was to make a physical improvement by a carefully-thought-out scheme of physical training, combined with good feeding, surroundings as comfortable as circumstances permitted, and last, but by no means least, training in *esprit de corps* and duties of citizenship. Of course there

was only one man to run a job like that—D—, the ex-Labour member. He was not physically fit, though his big heart had carried him through as a company commander, so it was a good excuse to pull him out of the trenches. He soon got a move on; and, starting with absolutely nothing, he very shortly rigged up canvas huts, and by carefully organised “borrowing” from careless people he began to make his boys comfortable.

During our first month in the trenches the frost was continuous. And since there were over 3000 yards of trench to keep in order in the front line alone, to say nothing of the support and reserve lines, it was a physical impossibility to revet. The consequence was that when the thaw came we were badly beaten. The first attack in the shape of a semi-thaw we coped with easily, but just as we had got our trenches clear it froze and then thawed again with days of continuous rain. I shall not forget in a hurry the day of the final *débâcle*. It was the hardest walk, or swim rather, that I have ever done—up to our waists in most places, sometimes deeper: not, mark you, mere water, but clotted mud of the consistency of soft toffee. We passed three men absolutely stuck fast on our way round, and we had to get a rescue party to pull them out with drag ropes.

As a through line ours had ceased to exist, and for the next few days we were forced to

man the front line with isolated posts. I think the 12th Royal Scots had the worst time; anyhow quite fifty of their men came out with no boots or socks on, and it was a fortnight before we had completely salved their trenches.

We did not altogether forget the enemy during this unequal contest with the weather. The usual raids and attempted raids took place. While the snow was on the ground we found the white patrol coats of the greatest assistance, for snow does show up a man, even on a dark night.

To add to our labours we were called upon to supply big working parties for planting our old friends the dumb-bell bombs to act as anti-tank mines. We sowed these mines all over the place, and it was reported in the early days of the Boche offensive that one Hun had been seen to step lightly on a mine and—disappear! So they would have settled the tank question all right.

But the Boche was very scared of our tanks as the following instance will show. A very fine new traction-engine had been left in the Gouzeaucourt Valley by people working on the roads during the Boche counter-attack in November 1917. M— of the heavy T.M.'s had his eye on this engine and one night he sallied forth to get it. It took the party some time to work up steam—but when they started to go home—hell was let loose, and not only

on them but on us too. For the Boche must have thought the noise was caused by tanks moving into position for an attack at dawn.

The division was pulled out for a few weeks to prepare for the Boche offensive by getting rid of the fourth battalion to each of our brigades. Of course we regimental officers knew what that meant—double the work with a quarter fewer men to do it. None of us believed for one moment that we should have less line to hold or less fighting to do. And as a matter of fact we held more extended lines and did more fighting with three battalions than we ever had done with four. But we blamed the right people for our increased labours.

And there was the little matter of sentiment too. We were one of the lucky divisions which only had to pass battalions on to someone else, and did not have to disband any, except in the case of the 3rd South Africans; but as their recruiting difficulty was always with them that didn't matter so much. Our two battalions to go were the Argylls from the Highlanders, and the Scottish Rifles from the Lowlanders. It was a bitter parting, for I had known many of these men ever since I started soldiering. Luckily we were not called upon to make a choice, they were warned for it from the realms above.

The Scottish Rifles rejoined us after the

March retreat: the Argylls never did, though they had been promised. Old Bill, now commanding the Scottish Rifles, had been with the division since it was formed. They had been on the whole an exceptionally lucky battalion since they had come to the Lowland Brigade from the 28th Brigade, to make room for the South Africans. But they had heavy losses shortly after leaving us: two of their best men among others, Major Forsyth while leading a raid, and Yates, the regimental sergeant-major. It was noticeable in the war how bad luck often followed a change. Over and over again one knew of cases where men who had lived untouched for years in one particular niche of the Great War, would lose their lives immediately after changing their jobs.

Again we had some glorious opportunities for shooting, for all round Sailly Laurette are natural ranges and excellent training-grounds. The weather was perfect, practically no rain, but dry, cold days and nights which soon made the men forget their trench existence.

The offensive was due to take place early in March, so we were kept in corps reserve, waiting. During this waiting period the silence of the Boche was most uncanny; not a shot was fired, and one could wander where one liked without fear of molestation from our old enemies the 5·9-inches. A few days before the

offensive began the Highlanders and South Africans took over the line from the 39th Division, the Highlanders being on the left in their old place. We were in divisional reserve back at Sorel. But every morning we were awakened with the banging of our own guns, firing counter-preparations. One morning it seemed a bit louder than usual, and then the Boche began to send it back. The great offensive had begun !

CHAPTER XI

THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE.—1918

THERE were just two excellent reasons, although no excuses however reasonable can be taken for defeat, for the retreat of the Fifth Army—too wide a front and insufficient troops to hold it. The Boche struck with all his force and power at the weakest part in the chain, the joint of two allied armies, a joint which had been but recently altered.

And it appeared to us that the farther north the blow extended the weaker it seemed to become. We for our part felt it most on our right, where the South Africans temporarily lost Gauche Wood but regained it with a brilliant counter-attack; while the Highlanders were called upon only to repel a half-hearted effort from Gonnelle; and the Third Army on our left, so far as we knew, had no serious effort made against them in the neighbourhood of Havrincourt. Back in reserve round Heudecourt and Dessart Wood we were forced to keep on our gas masks for hours, while the Boche plied Sorel, Fins, and all approaches with

purring Percies. The divisional headquarters at Nurlu caught it too, for a real fat Bertha of a Percy made most excellent shooting all the time we were in the neighbourhood, landing one right on to the E.F. Canteen.

Later in the day we got disquieting rumours to the effect that Vaucellette Farm had been captured. Now if this were true our people in the north would have to come back, for Vaucellette Farm was a most important point. Then we heard—no rumour this time—that Chapel Hill had been taken. But while we got ready for immediate action we received the news that the South Africans had recaptured it. Though the hill was not in our divisional area its retention was of vital importance to us. I ordered the 11th Royal Scots to send out officers' patrols to clear up the situation on the right of the South Africans. We were all fresh and keen, having just come out of rest, but even so the capture of forty Boches by a sergeant and a few men was a pretty good effort. They used their rifles too, did those patrols; and one of them, led by Kennedy the scout-master, penetrated almost to Vaucellette. He reported that some of our troops, 21st Division, were still holding out there—gallant fellows! For in spite of what our theorists may lay down concerning the necessity of hanging on to the last, even though surrounded, it is quite another thing to stay

where you are when you can see an irruption of field-grey crowding round your flank as you manfully struggle against the odds in front. It doesn't take a Napoleon to guess the result of staying too long. Most of us have made sand-castles, on which, when completed, we have proudly stood watching the tide lap round us. But there came a time when we had to go, not on account of the castle subsiding, for that still had many inches of safety ; but because the tide had crept so far in behind us that we must jump or get our feet wet. Apply all this to the retreat and you have the point of view of the poor old Fifth Army who, like the sand-castle in the tide, were simply overwhelmed by force of numbers.

Next day we still held the high ground running north from Chapel Hill, but we knew that pressure on the south would force us to quit it. That southern pressure caused two companies of the 11th Royal Scots to reinforce the South Africans on the ridge near Revelon Farm. And later I was obliged to send the Borderers to watch the ground south-east of Sorel. And soon the Borderers were fighting—fighting to maintain our right flank inviolate during the withdrawal of the South Africans, Highlanders, and Third Army, which took place that night. That flank guard was skilfully handled by S— of the one arm, as one knew perfectly well he would. It was a near

squeak, though, for the Highlanders found the enemy in Fins when they passed through.

We were ordered to hold the green line at Nurlu with the Highlanders on our left. A reconnaissance on my right in the late afternoon made me fear the worst on that flank, for, as far as one could see there were no formed bodies of troops in that quarter at all. There was a wood on this flank which made the situation even more sinister. We did not all get into our new line till the early hours of the morning.

An examination of some Boche prisoners gave me a strong impression that their hearts were not in the business. It was at Haute Allaines at 4 A.M. that I made the astounding statement to N—— of the 106th Company that the Boche was a goner if only we could keep our end up for a few weeks.

At dawn D—— of the South Africans and I were taken by the divisional commander round a new line which extended from the Picque de Malasaises to the heart of that big woodland running north from St Pierre Vaast Wood. The South Africans were placed in reserve just behind the Picque; while the Highlanders prolonged our line and linked up with the Third Army. Just before starting I had dashed out orders for withdrawal from Nurlu. As soon as I had allotted a frontage to each battalion one of the staff went off to guide them in. But

the Boche was waiting for no reconnaissances that morning. He attacked on that weak right flank, and S—— with his Borderers had all he could do to hang on. Luckily a number of South Africans were in the wood, and these, led by an officer riding a grey horse—I never found out who it was—made a gallant counter-attack which relieved the situation. The South Africans, be it noted, were past-masters in the gentle art of counter-attacking in those black days.

As soon as the Borderers could shake themselves free they began to withdraw under very heavy fire! But C., a splendid company commander, handled his rear-guard like a book, and so enabled his battalion to get across the canal in safety. British soldiers hate wetting their feet; and they would rather risk death sometimes than wade across a stream. It was so at this canal; for S—— found a long *queue* of men waiting their turn at a plank bridge under heavy machine-gun fire.

The 11th slipped away all right under the skilful guidance of A. C. Campbell, in charge during the Bart.'s absence on leave. Kennedy and A—— were also of the greatest value in fighting the hardest of all actions, that of the rear-guard. But the 12th, who had to take up a line in the wood on our left, were not so fortunate in shaking off their pursuers, for they all arrived together in that wood, and fighting

was continuous. But where had the Highlanders got to? There was not a sign of them anywhere, and later the Boches began to infiltrate round that flank too.

What had happened was this. The general trend of the retreat was in a south-westerly direction: we kept on our course correctly enough; not so the right of the Third Army, who (doubtless for excellent reasons) kept on almost due west, with the result that there was an enormous gap between the Highlanders and the right of the Third Army. The Highlanders made every effort to prevent this gap, already 3000 yards wide, from getting any bigger, and consequently they made a gap on our left which we found it impossible to fill; for the brigade was already holding a line of 4000 yards. It is a mistake to have a brigade headquarters away from the main road; for no one came near us, and an order sent that afternoon to say that the South Africans were withdrawing, never reached us. Consequently we could not believe it when reports came in from the Borderers, who were on the right, to the effect that the Picque was captured by the Boche, until the right flank of the Borderers was heavily attacked.

At nightfall the position of the Lowland Brigade might be summed up as follows:—Both flanks heavily attacked. The Boches in this attack made use of red tracer bullets, to show

how their flank attacks were progressing, one can only suppose ; though after we got used to them it showed us exactly where the Boches were. But they didn't shift us, though it was necessary to take up a new line in St Pierre Vaast Wood. The Pioneers had been attached to us on this day, and they carried themselves right well for the rest of the retreat, though lack of experience made them somewhat immobile.

Early next morning the Boche gave us an illustration of the sand-castle and the tide ; for he simply swamped us on both flanks, cutting off the South Africans, who fought on when surrounded until 4.30 that afternoon, only to surrender when all were wounded and the ammunition had run out. Combles gave us a breather, and here we held them for some time, fighting from ridge to ridge in perfect co-operation with our gunners, who took full advantage of open sights on ideal gunner targets—masses of men on the opposite ridge.

It might have been a divisional field day, for there were no other troops in that particular battle ; and our aim all the time was to get south-west to the river, on which we could rest our right flank—and our aching feet ! K— brought his Highlanders with great skill right away back from their perilous position, so that we were able to keep our end up with two brigades anyhow. And the gunners ! God, how we blessed the gunners that Sunday.

Half way through the battle we were told that ammunition was running short for guns and rifles! It was bad enough taking on odds of ten to one— Well, we still had the bayonet.

The whole country-side was grey with moving Boches, like lice on a trench-sodden kilt. “Look at Jerry,” shouted a man. Among those thousands we saw what he meant—a great long Boche officer in a long grey coat, very conspicuous indeed. “Why don’t you shoot him?” But for some reason the men wouldn’t. I think they thought it might bring bad luck if that particular Boche were killed. Men are strange creatures in that way, one has noticed. And all the time we were working, working to get our right flank on that river, and when one had a moment in which to think, one wondered dully if the promised reinforcements were anywhere about—just as regimental officers must have wondered on another Sunday’s battle for how long they must hold out.

But we were retiring! The first bit of luck we had was in the discovery of a corps ammunition dump, which really saved the situation, for the men were absolutely beat. And still that field-grey wave kept creeping round our right, our undefended right. K— had an experience which happened to few infantry brigadiers in this war—his horse was shot under him.

The river at last! And we had "Waterloo'd" the Boche, for as soon as we reached that line just in front of stinking old Maricourt, with outposts in position, he halted, and the day was saved.

We found elements of corps troops holding this line when we arrived, all sorts, from gas experts to agriculturalists. We got into unwonted luxury in the shape of a canvas hut, where we found some bully beef. Then the cavalry began to trickle past, going north to fill up that huge gap, and we were to be relieved—Oh joy! But no one seemed to know by whom.

We had plenty of excitement while we were consolidating our new position. First of all six planes in our colours came down so low that they nearly brushed us; they then proceeded to bomb us well and good, and not only that, but they made excellent practice with their machine guns. We stood it for some time: then I turned on what was left of the brigade—it was not much—and gave them hell with everything we had got. If they were Britishers they deserved it all; if Boche, likewise. Afterwards we were told that it was quite impossible for those planes to have been Boches masquerading in our colours, because, forsooth, it wasn't done. After all these years of Hun horrors there were people fit to be at large who asserted that it wasn't

done! They could not have been Britishers in those planes, for the machines were so close that I could see the features of the men, and they must have been totally blind if they could not see 600 British soldiers, all more or less concentrated.

Our other excitement was caused by a genius who elected, just as we were concentrated near the spot, to blow up a huge corps dump. I think that frightened us all far more than the Boche, for it rained steel in considerable quantities for a lengthy time.

H—, one of our gunners, had just left us late at night, all waiting to be relieved, when he met a crowd of men a mile back on the road. "What's the matter?" for they seemed to have something on their minds. "Are the enemy holding Maricourt?" asked someone. "No," was the answer; "why, even the brigadier is in front of Maricourt." "What division?" "The 9th." "Good old 9th," shouted a voice in the darkness. "I was in them once. . . . It's all right, boys, come along," and off they trooped into the darkness. Later on we found a party of some scared folk rushing madly by our headquarters. They were led gently back by D—. Night is undoubtedly a scarey time during retreats.

Eventually, as dawn was breaking, we got back to Talus Boise. How those old familiar spots brought Somme memories rushing back

to us. On reaching Bray we were told to shift on to Etineham. Now one had a nasty kind of something-wrong-on-the-flanks feeling all that day at Etineham, for there were batteries in action just north of us firing nearly due north. The 85th Division and corps troops had a great fight that day, and our big guns were all collected here, in addition to the field batteries of the 9th and 85th Divisions. The Boche put in four divisions, and they were broken at the end of the day. I forgot to mention, too, that all available tank crews with their Lewis guns had been collected in order that the Boche should miss nothing. The result was a hellish mixture for him whenever he moved forward to attack. Again and again the fool rushed in at us, a purely frontal attack, and again and again he was hurled back, often with the bayonet. One of my informants was one of a party of the 9th Division who happened to be at the corps bayonet fighting school at the time. This school arrived on the battlefield complete, with instructors, and the first time they went in they had a golden opportunity of putting in some useful practical demonstrations.

Oh, what a fool the Boche was that day, for had he only gone off to the north and circled round that flank he would have forced us out of it. In nine cases out of ten he

would have done this. Why he did not do so will now never be known.

But after beating him off all day it became necessary to get back still farther owing to big trouble on our right. Late at night I got orders to make a night march and cover the crossings over the Ancre, securing the high ground at Meaulte. I was also told that there was every prospect of being attacked before I got there. No one knew the road, as no one had reconnoitred it, but we couldn't help that. The poor men who had just settled down to rest after days of toil had to turn out, and they all marched out of Etineham singing. I remember commenting on this splendid spirit to D—, as we rode along in the darkness. D—, a man of few words, reminded me that the rum ration had just been served.

We managed to find two parallel roads on which to place our fighting people and our transport, the latter on the inner flank; then with a flank guard as well as an advance guard we sallied forth into the night. Two main roads running from the battle direction towards Amiens lay across the route we intended to take. These roads we guessed would be blocked with traffic, and would require the presence of some strong, silent officer to stem the crowd while our column crossed unchecked. We were not mistaken,

and the strong, silent one was forced to indent on the leading battalion for a platoon with fixed bayonets to enable us to keep schedule time.

After crossing these roads the march became rather uncanny. Not a sound broke the stillness of the night, as the Boche was engaged on a similar job to our own, shifting his guns under cover of darkness. The only people we met were some strayed heavy gunners in a car and a Canadian motor machine-gun battery: the latter we roped in as a flank guard. It was depressing to see the whole country illuminated with burning dumps—our dumps—and Nissen bow huts (the latter make a merry blaze).

We got into position without further incident, and on going round at dawn I found every battalion in its right place. Good work!

S— of the one arm had left us at St Pierre Vaast Wood, badly wounded in the lung as we thought. He spent most of his time in hospital running up and down the stairs in order to convince sceptical medical boards that he was perfectly fit. It was his fifth wound, and he rejoined us at the end of May.

The position we were ordered to hold was a strong one, and we felt confident that we could hold our own against any attacks coming against our front; for we were lucky enough to have two crests in our bit, a real one and

a "false" one. The scouts held the real one, from which the country could be viewed for miles around, while the main line of resistance was on the false one. But the flanks were not satisfactory. They would prove all right provided there were troops available to hold them; but it was obvious that our position could be turned with the greatest ease if these flanks were left unguarded. Unfortunately our left was an army joint, though that too was in process of alteration. Consequently it was vitally important that we should get touch with the troops detailed to hold these flanks. Riding round in the half light just before dawn I couldn't see a soul out Albert way, and it was not until some hours later that the scouts of the 11th Royal Scots got touch with anyone. On our right I found the same situation. But later on I met our corps commander on this flank, and he gave us to understand that a brigade from another division would shortly be in position, for he could see for himself, just as well as we could, that if the Boche gained the high ground on my right flank they would command the Ancre crossings and make it very difficult for us to get back to the other side of the river.

It was very still and cold on that March morning as we rode round the outpost line. With the exception of the sentries the men were all lying where they had halted, in their

battle kit. They had no coats, but all of them were sleeping heavily, trying to make up many nights' arrears. Occasionally a "crump" would land on the high ground, which made me confident that we should soon be attacked, for the Boche in that open fighting never shelled without some ulterior motive. As we passed through a farmyard, the buildings of which I was reconnoitring with a view to a strong point, we—my groom and I—heard a cock crow. Nothing was said, but a telepathic message passed between that silent Scot and myself: "Be damned if the Boche is going to have those chickens." I saw him disappear into the recesses of a hen-roost; there followed an appalling din, sufficient to waken the dead, and shortly afterwards B—— appeared with a defunct enormous grey rooster in his hands, his face a dull pink from his exertions. "Had a job to catch this one, sirr." We both felt rather like a pair of criminals performing their first burglary; at least I did, but who could tell what that phlegmatic person B—— thought about anything? Two days before he had seen his pal, a large woolly dog, receive a shell all to himself not two yards from where he was standing with the horses. The mare was wounded, and B—— at once produced a wound stripe, her second one in that campaign.

A noise behind us made us turn to see, looking at us grimly with a "Now I've got

yer" air—a tank! It gazed at us and we at it; and then without a word it glided slowly over the muck heap and, crossing the main road, disappeared in the morning mist.

Brigade headquarters had been established in the village of Dernancourt during my absence; and since we were already linked up with the division I decided to stop there, though it was the wrong side of the river. On my way back I observed a truly magnificent building—the E.F. Canteen, no less; the sort of place which we front-liners had often heard of but seldom seen, the place where one could buy literally anything. I couldn't resist it; my only excuse was that I had become demoralised after the rooster episode. Riding up to the balcony, on which were numerous clerks in various stages of undress, I observed: "The Boche will be here shortly (I was indeed a true prophet). Advise you to hop it while there is time." They took my advice—at once!

On reaching my headquarters I found all asleep with the exception of R—, my intelligence. This youth, a boy of perfectly angelic countenance, with no principles worth mentioning, and with an appetite which can only bear comparison with that of an alligator, was—not asleep. He was hunting chickens round and round the farmyard, pursued by a fat and angry dame, hoarsely wheezing, "Brigand, brigand," as she chased him. R—, with a look of

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injured innocence on his face, stopped when he saw me. His only excuse, as he showed two defunct pullets, was that he thought I should like chickens for breakfast. Great minds think alike: I had to pay the good lady twenty francs for those chickens—and the farm was burnt down by Boche shelling that night!

There was no time to sleep or eat. Orders had to be out and round, and I didn't altogether like the look of things on my right. R—, who had stolen a motor-bike, took me off on the carrier. On the way we stopped at the canteen. I had put D—, the ex-Labour member, in charge of this. He provided us with some biscuits, and I gave him orders to organise a divisional distribution of goods. While I was arranging things with D— a much flustered but truculent sergeant-major came up to me with a formidable-looking document. It was to the effect that I had taken over the canteen with property running into some thousands. He wanted me to sign this, and I signed as I would have signed anything. Most of the division, including the gunners, got a share. One Borderer walked in. "Well, what can I do for you, me lad?" asked D— in his best shop manner. The lad, lousy and in battle kit, which means that he had no room for trifles, asked for a pair of lady's shoes—and he got 'em! The divisional commander offered to go shares in responsibility if there was trouble over it; but

D—, acting under my instructions, was forced to burn the place in the afternoon when the situation became critical.

R— and I on our motor-bike, shedding biscuits as we bumped along, had barely got round our line when the Boche attacked our right, as I felt sure he would. The brigade which had been promised arrived, but, just as things were getting exciting, the battalion next to us withdrew. It wasn't any fault of theirs ; they had written orders which were shown to R— when he came up and began to abuse the company commander. Yes, the orders were plain enough, and as a matter of fact the company commander stayed a quarter of an hour longer than he should have stayed in order not to leave us in the lurch.

The 12th Royal Scots, with the help of some fancy shooting on the part of the gunners under M—, beat off this attack, the gunners getting well into a whole crowd in a narrow valley, which gave us respite on this flank ; for it was not for some hours that he discovered the heel of Achilles outside our flank. Then he tested our left, and got but cold comfort from the 11th under that firebrand, A. C. Campbell. Our headquarters now began to catch it, but only light stuff as yet. Still we had a thatched roof which was bound to catch fire sooner or later.

Early in the afternoon, while glassing the commanding ridge to the right and outside our

flank, I could plainly see the enemy massing, and there didn't seem to be a soul to stop them. Wondering what on earth had happened to the division on our right, of which there was no sign, I dashed off on a motor-bike to warn K—, who with his Highlanders had just got in to rest in a village about a mile down the river. K—, who was asleep, realised the danger at once, and promptly got a move on his people to watch my right flank on our side of the river. They were supposed to be in divisional reserve ; but as far as one could see it was doubtful if they would be in time to prevent our people from being cut off.

In the afternoon the "situation developed" to some tune: there were wild appeals from R—, who complained that the enemy were getting right round him in the village of Meaulte ; and, later, the same thing from A. C. Campbell, who complained that the troops on his left flank were crossing the Ancre at Albert bridge, acting on their orders. The only thing to do was to get the 12th Royal Scots back by placing the Pioneers in echelon on the right rear, with the Borderers in rear of that again. While these orders were being taken in person by D—, my brigade major, a sapper officer rushed in to say that he could not carry out my order to fire Meaulte village as there were some old people who refused to leave their homes. "Carry them away then, the village must be burnt."

Another misunderstanding ; to my dismay I found all the Nissen huts on *our* side of the river suddenly burst into heavy black smoke, effectually blotting out our view of the fight, and, what was even more important, our view of that high ground on the right flank.

Another Job's comforter rushed in ; H—— the C.R.E. this time. We had just completed a reconnaissance of all the crossings from Dernancourt to Albert, and he reported that not one of them had been prepared for demolition ; then in rushed someone else : "The Boche are over the big bridge"—that was the bridge quite close to us. What had happened to our fellows then ? I was the only man left in brigade headquarters, for everyone was away on jobs. Rushing out with a Cameron whom I picked up on the road, we met, to our great relief, a company of Camerons doubling up through the village. We formed them up to deal with any offensive from the bridge.

But the bridge south of the village—what of that ? I knew that none of my people could be there. Rushing through the village I met Pat A—— of the Seaforths, and we, together with fifteen men, were just in time to stop the Boche from getting across and cutting off the whole show. As we blazed away at him we tried to find some means of destroying the bridge ; but we found that a concrete bridge takes something stronger than entrenching implements. I was

nearly shot by an excited pioneer, who had obviously never fired a rifle before. And, as we fired at the Boche coming over on the sky-line about 800 yards away, a curious thing happened. A soldier in French uniform was seen to walk up the road about midway between us and the Boche, going straight amongst them without any sign of molestation ; he was followed by a woman dressed in black.

As soon as the Boche saw that the bridge was held he stopped.

That night, while D—— and I were going round our new line, an embankment on our side of the river, we suddenly saw in the moonlight the whole line making back over the hill. D—— rushed in, rallied them, and, shouting lustily in his dull, booming voice, took them back to their original positions. It was the same old story—the Boche had passed the word along to retire.

Next day our gunners had some splendid targets in the low ground about the centre of my position. Our men had an awful time in the embankment, for besides constant attacks the Boche had got up his T.M.'s and simply gave them hell on such a well-defined target. We lost a lot of good officers and men here, among others Kennedy, while he was leading a brilliant charge against a Boche machine gun which had got into a position from which it could rake the whole of our

line. Kennedy had a great pal, B—, who was reported killed on the first day of the offensive. As a matter of fact, B—, though badly wounded did not die, but this we did not know till long afterwards. Kennedy swore vengeance on the Boches for B—'s supposed death. During the black days of the retreat he was a veritable Ney, constantly leading local counter-pushes, which are the life and soul of a successful rear-guard action. He died, and so did A. C. Campbell, another incomparable leader whom we could ill spare; but B—, who took over the battalion in his place, was a worthy successor in those trying times.

During that morning an officer, who I think was mad from all that he had gone through, rushed into our headquarters to say that the whole line was going back. We all got on our horses and rushed off to look; not a move, our men were as steady as rocks.

During the morning the Australians came up to take over, and we were uncommonly glad to see them. Later on the Boches got on to our village with 8-inch. It was not a strongly built village and so it couldn't stand much of that treatment.

The retreat was over, for that was the high-water mark of the Boches' offensive in that quarter.

STATEMENT BY CAPTAIN G. PEIRSON

Who was captured by the enemy in March 1918 while holding the appointment of Brigade Major in the 16th (Irish) Division.

After being captured at La Motte near Corbie, I was taken to the German Battalion Headquarters for examination by an intelligence officer. In the course of this examination the officer asked me if I knew the 9th Division. He said that the fight it put up was considered one of the best on the whole front, and particularly the last stand of the South African Brigade at (I think) Moislains, which, he said, was magnificent. Both men and officers fought to the last against overwhelming odds, the Brigadier himself being taken firing a machine gun, while his Brigade Major was killed beside him.

After this conversation I was sent to Le Cateau, and on the way many German officers spoke to me, and all mentioned the splendid fight put up by the South Africans.

On reaching Le Cateau I met two officers (British), who said that whilst their party was being marched to this place they were stopped by the Kaiser, who asked if anyone present belonged to the 9th Division. The Kaiser then said that had all divisions fought as well as the 9th Division he would have had no more troops to carry on his attack with.

The truth of this statement I cannot vouch for, and unfortunately I have forgotten the names of the officers, but Brigadier-General Bellingham and Lieutenant-Colonel Goll were both at Le Cateau at the time and heard the story.

On my way to Le Cateau I met between thirty and forty men of the South African Brigade working as

prisoners of war close to Epehy. They were in a very bad condition, as no rations were allowed them, and they had to exist on what the individual German soldiers chose to give them and what they could find in the old trenches, consequently nearly all of them were suffering badly from dysentery.

G. PEIRSON, Captain,
General List.

CHAPTER XII

THE BLOODY SALIENT AGAIN.—APRIL, 1918

THAT night we all slept in a wood just behind an enormous château. It was warm enough anyhow. The château was not shelled while we were there, because, I am convinced, the Boches had fixed upon it for a corps headquarters for one of their own people; but early next morning they gassed the wood and forced us to put our masks on and afterwards shift our quarters.

We marched that day; and while we marched in column of route with pipes playing we got well shelled, to our intense astonishment, for we thought that we were miles away from the Boche. We saw a lot of Australians, and these men all had the same story to tell—that we were the first formed body of troops which they had seen. Thousands of leaderless men walking along the road, quite orderly and in no panic, were going back in company because they had no one to tell them where to go, what to do, or how to do it when they got there.

That night we struck a priceless billet and topping hosts in the shape of the cavalry corps headquarters, who bathed us, dined us, and gave us unstinted whisky—we have always had a soft spot for the cavalry since that kind of treatment.

Next day off again to a dirty little village. None of us could sleep though, for we all seemed weighed down with Black Care, which like a heavy cloud seemed to press on our brains. It was days before we got rid of this beastly feeling. Then off to the Salient to take over from Australians who were to come south. On our way up we were entertained by General Birdwood, who asked us many questions. His billet was in Fletre, in an old château immortalised in *Les Trois Mousquetaires*. We took a very keen interest in that old château two months later, and we blessed our lucky stars that it was old—and 5·9-inch proof.

The Australians had done a mighty lot of work during the winter, for there were miles and miles of U-framed and duckboarded trenches, the only possible kind to make in that awful swamp-like, shell-pitted slough of despond known as the Salient. B—, the commander of the 3rd Australian Brigade, took me round and showed me, with pardonable pride, all the doings of his men. My line extended from the Ypres-Menin Canal

up to Shrewsbury Forest. It was a peculiar line, for it inclined out towards the Boches' the farther north one went. In other words it followed the Passchendaele Ridge, which we had captured at such a cost in the previous autumn, and away to the south of us ran Wytschaete Ridge, a most commanding feature, which made it possible for us to throw our line so far forward in the north with impunity; for the 1917 offensive had given us all the high ground, and a spring offensive now would enable us to complete what should have been completed in the autumn—the kicking of the Boche out of Flanders. The weather stopped us then; it certainly favoured the Boche in his counter-stroke now. (Henceforth that most unprintable word will be spelt as pronounced by all respectable Britishers. Wytchett we always talked about, so Wytchett let it be.)

I had just time to rush back to Kemmel where I met my C.O.'s after their long train journey. The Bart. had rejoined from leave, cursing his luck at missing the retreat. He didn't get much sympathy from those of us who had managed to survive the ordeal, and who still found that sleep came with difficulty.

That evening I walked up to the top of Kemmel Hill. It was a lovely spring evening with the young green just beginning to show on the trees, and the birds were all piping their

evening hymn as if there were no war within 1000 miles. Yet somehow one didn't feel happy. Something weighed on one's mind, creating a feeling of intolerable depression, which I found it difficult to shake off. The view from Kemmel Hill on that spring evening was remarkable, for the sun was right behind, enabling one to see far, far away over the Boche lines. The place seemed a mountain of strength—impregnable: and yet it came to me clearly that those fair young trees would soon be reduced to matchwood, and the haunt of the mavis, which indeed was warbling sweetly, would be torn and shattered by the unsightly hand of war. But cheer up—away Black Care! and a race down the hill to its very bottom had the effect of shaking up one's liver, the real cause of all depression.

During the next few days I was far too busy to brood. Our headquarters were in Spoil Bank near the Bluffs, where we had been in 1915, just after the division came out of Loos. We found Hill 60 honeycombed with dug-outs, sufficient to take the support battalion. The Australians had just completed a line of posts running from the Bluff towards Hill 60. As soon as I got time I proceeded to reconnoitre these posts, for owing to the haste of the Australian departure they had not been formally handed over. The Australian makes a pretty clean job of anything he takes

on. His plan had been to camouflage the posts, so that if it became necessary to man this reserve line the Boche would not have the vaguest notion where the defenders had planted themselves. He succeeded so well that not only were the Boche gunners hoodwinked as to the whereabouts of those posts, but so were we. All one day we spent trying to locate them, and even then we hadn't found them all. In most cases we found them somewhat unexpectedly. D—, my brigade major, wandered round with the plan in his hand and his nose in the air. "I think this must be I. 64—" Then he disappeared. He was quite right, and as he picked himself out of the camouflaged man-trap with curses, he wished the Australians had not made quite such a clean job of it.

In front of our line of resistance we had a chain of outposts consisting of little groups of Boche pill-boxes. I didn't like them, because they could not be used for defence, but only for shelter; since their embrasures faced our way while the entrances faced the Boche. They were all situated in the low ground, too, along the swaggiest part of the swaggiest ground in Europe; for remember that the land, thanks to all drainage having been burst up by years of shelling, had gone back to the condition one would have expected to find just after the Flood had subsided. It would have been better

going in those days, for at anyrate there would have been a level surface to wade over, not a series of pits so close together that it was impossible to avoid them.

From our main front line we had a perfect view of the Boche line, for the only bit of high ground he possessed was Zandvoorde ridge and village. Behind this ridge he massed most of his guns, though we very soon spotted and shot at several Boche batteries down in the swamp. The gunners were rubbing their hands with glee. Never had they seen such targets, and they promptly proceeded to take the gifts which the gods, for the first time in their experience, had provided for them. Just before the offensive we were given an appreciation of the situation. That the Boche could mount a battle at very short notice, there was no doubt. For he had all his aerodromes and hospitals in sufficient numbers; also his dumps were large and numerous. But in view of the fact that he was having a great success down south it was not considered likely that he would turn his attention to us in the Salient just yet.

Unhappily the Boche was a keen student of moral effect in war; and he knew perfectly well that tired divisions had replaced fresh divisions hurried southward to stem his onrush. I don't think, judging by what I have heard from prisoners, that he had very much up here

to start with in the way of infantry ; but he had a number of guns. And his thrust on the 9th April met with such astonishing success, especially against the Portuguese, that it caused his Great General Staff to lose their heads, press the advantage thus gained in the north at the expense of the offensive in the south, and finally end in irreparable disaster.

Over and over again the bait of the Channel Ports proved too much for the Boche's sense of proportion. For there lay Ypres, during those four years, so alluring in the hollow, and asking to be taken by a really well-planned attack. Why did he not succeed ? Because, as everyone knows, he was up against a nation whom he did not understand ; a nation which is only at its best when things are at their very worst ; and, God knows, to us who had to exist in those shell-torn swamps during the long period of trial it was the severest test that any one of us Britishers has been called upon to endure.

It is not too much to say that it was at Ypres that the Boche first knew that he had met his match, as we broke his offensives again and yet again. Here, even with the aid of the biggest surprise in war, an aid which we could not have believed it possible for any civilised nation to contemplate for a moment, he not only failed but brought such retaliation on himself as to make him curse the day he

ever thought of gas. No other nation would have held on as we did ; for every other would have cleared out of that terrible Salient.

And there were many of us who held the view that evacuation was the only course left open to us, the holding of Ypres being sentimental folly : but events have proved that clinging on to this Salient was the right policy.

At a divisional conference just before the Boche offensive we made a strong request that the rank and file might be trusted to hear the worst, pointing out that the British character could stand bad news better than no news at all. The request was duly granted ; and thereafter we received the most lurid accounts of our reverses. Some of us even thought that the staff were overdoing it a bit, but the men didn't mind, bless them. They revelled in defeats. A curious creature is the British soldier. It is a well-known fact that the moral of the British Army was raised to an appreciable extent by reading the unexpurgated account of the Pemberton-Billing trial !

On the evening of the 8/9th April we were ordered to extend our line southward. We protested that we already had as much as we could handle with our reduced strength and with our three battalions. To our amazement we were informed by the corps under which we happened to be serving at the time that we

shouldn't be so windy ! When the attack came next day one had a pretty shrewd idea which was the windiest place—it was many miles nearer corps headquarters than our front line.

While going round our line on the 9th April with Innes Brown, who was commanding the Borderers at that time, I heard the news of Fleurbaix and Bac St Maur. As I parted from him I warned him to look out for squalls on our front, and that was the last I saw of a very old friend with whom I had soldiered for years. He and his adjutant were killed next day.

The 11th Royal Scots had to side-step and take over from the Highlanders a long bit of the line to the south of the canal on the night of the 9/10th April. We had barely time to reconnoitre it, and we found an outpost line of pill-boxes similar to that across the canal on its northern side. But the front line trench stopped abruptly a few hundred yards south of the canal, and there was a big gap between us and the next division. During the whole of the 9th we were absorbing drafts, or it would be more correct to say that they absorbed us, for they outnumbered the brigade. A real good lot those drafts were—Scottish Rifles, Royal Scots, Royal Scots Fusiliers, and last but by no means least, a strong contingent of Glasgow Highlanders. These last I turned over to B. S_____, our senior Church of Scotland padre, and he, together with

M'Kinley, the adjutant of the 12th, himself an old Glasgow Highlander, soon made them at home. In a very short time—short because most of them went west at Kemmel, they began to call themselves the very First Regiment of Foot. One had had some experience of drafts by this time, and to look at that draft fairly made one's mouth water.

We had hardly taken them over before the shock came; for, in the middle of our relief, while our people were wandering all over the country, the enemy gave us a heavy gas bombardment which lasted all night and well on into the following morning. But we were not attacked till the afternoon. The posts were scuppered to a man on the south of the canal, though little M'Gregor of the 11th put up a gallant fight, as one knew he would: poor lad, physically unfit, but with such a big heart that he would not go sick. Of course one finds out all these things later on.

The Borderers north of the canal held on to all their posts, with the exception of two which they retook that night by a fine counter-attack in which they captured prisoners and a Boche officer. The attack was never really pressed home against their main line of resistance. It was otherwise with the 11th, who found that they had no one on their right at all, and they were called upon to repulse a combined frontal and flank attack from their front line trench

which ended so abruptly as soon as the Boche had finished eating up the posts. They held it like the old stonewallers they were, D. S— and his Stokes mortar battery rendering invaluable service, the sergeant-major firing a Stokes by holding it between his knees. Foiled here, the Boche worked round and butted in at the White Château. Two companies of the 12th Royal Scots who were in reserve but who had been absorbing their draft all the morning, were flung in just in time to wrest the White Château from him. They even extended their line as far as the Damstrasse, a shallow cutting about 1000 yards long. So our position at the end of that attack was as follows:—The 11th Royal Scots were holding their original main line of resistance, and forming a defensive flank to the right round which the Boche was pouring, until they joined up with the 12th Royal Scots near White Château (a former resort of the late King of the Belgians, who would hardly have recognised his pleasant villa), who again refused their flank to the Damstrasse. The Borderers held their old line north of the canal.

C— arrived about 8 P.M. to say that the 7th Seaforths were on their way up to look after our exposed right flank. They were ordered to hold the Damstrasse. We heard that night that the South Africans, a strong battalion in strength who had been lent to another division, had made a vigorous counter-attack which had

retaken Messines. Next morning at 7 A.M. the Boche renewed his attack. He made no impression whatever on the 11th Royal Scots, and took it in the neck very badly against the 12th Royal Scots and the Seaforths. The latter lost a bit of the Damstrasse, but retook it and a good bit more by a bayonet charge. After that the Boche sat down to shell and mortar us out, since he couldn't shift us any other way. He gave the poor Seaforths a rotten time, and their casualties were very heavy. B—, their C.O., was detailed to take charge of the Borderers, as Horne was due to come back to command his old battalion, the Seaforths. B— came to me that night and implored me to let him stay with his lads, with whom he had only been a few days ; such is the way of British officers, who, whatever they may be commanding, consider that they stand *in loco parentis* when they have had charge of their men for five minutes ! Of course he was allowed to stay, but I was hard put to it for a C.O. for the Borderers, till S— of the one arm came back to his lambs.

Our brigade headquarters was in Spoil Bank, a foul hole which had to be continuously pumped to prevent our getting swamped out. It was part of the famous Bluff which by this time was tunnelled along its length. The tunnellers had done wonders, considering the state of the country ; for every single dug-out had to be manned day and night by a pumping party.

We had electric light worked by a dynamo in the bank itself; it was absolutely essential in a place where one could not see a yard without artificial light of some sort. Imagine our joy when some interfering fool, whose normal abode lay well behind the lines, took advantage of our absence to come up and smash up the entire show, as he thought the Boche would shortly take over. Thereafter we groped our way about, falling into noisome pits which it was impossible to see by candle light. We have been looking for that citizen ever since!

Next day an attempt was made to rush the 11th Royal Scots on the canal bank, but it was a failure, and we managed to get identifications. That night an officers' patrol of the Borderers scuppered a pill-box garrison north of the canal. The Camerons came up from close support and relieved the Seaforths, while the Watch were echeloned close up at St Eloi. A few days of this sort of thing, waiting for the next biff without being strong enough to get an effective blow in first, is apt to get on the nerves; news, too, was scarce—always a bad sign—and what there was did not cheer us up much, for we heard that Wytchett Ridge had gone, the ridge which fairly looked down on the Passchendaele Ridge. This forced us to withdraw from and give up all that high ground for which we had sacrificed so much in the autumn.

We for our part were ordered to pull back to the line from the Bluff to Hill 60, the line which took in all those camouflaged posts which we had reconnoitred with so much trouble. How we thanked our stars that we had done it, for this withdrawal had to take place at night and to be completed by dawn. First of all we threw out a screen of outposts, the active patrolling of whom gave the Boche no reason to believe that we were going. The Borderers came back first and occupied the camouflaged posts north of the canal. Their reserve was in the dug-outs of Hill 60. The 12th Royal Scots covered the withdrawal of the 11th Royal Scots from their dangerous position, and we breathed a prayer of thankfulness when this extremely ticklish operation—a withdrawal when in close contact with the enemy—was accomplished without a hitch. The 12th in their turn held a line south of the canal and just in front of St Eloi which they handed over next day to the Highlanders. We were ordered to come back to Scherpenberg, a hill covered with huts, for all the world like a native village in the hills of Nigeria. They were shelling it when we arrived, and a fragment got young R—, who began to hop around on one leg. As I happened to want him for something I cursed him for playing the ass, not knowing he was wounded,

and told him to come to me. He still went on hopping, and finally disappeared into a French aid-post. We never saw him again, and we found out afterwards that he was rather badly wounded.

The French were coming up to relieve some of our exhausted troops ; we ourselves, though, were still considered capable of kicking, and so we were. They all looked very clean but rather grave, we thought. They hadn't been near a fight for months—we had never been away from the line for more than a month at a time during three years. They all proceeded to make their little funk-holes well on the lee side of the hill. Then it was decided to have a go at Wytchett. The French were asked if they could co-operate, and said they could, though we didn't see how that was humanly possible in view of the fact that they had only just come in and therefore could not possibly have had time to do a reconnaissance. We were right, as events turned out.

The division put in the 7th Seaforths and attacked with a smoke barrage. The Seaforths were the only battalion of the division which had had a few hours' rest, though that rest had been under shell fire. The Seaforths got into Wytchett all right, and they could see the Boche scampering away over Spanbrokmolan, which the French were due to

take. But what had happened to the French? In vain the Seaforths, fighting with superb gallantry, had taken Wytchett: they couldn't hold it with their right flank completely in the air, and so they were forced to come back to the outskirts of the village. The French didn't attack at all, though their higher command was under the impression that they had attacked.

Next morning the Boche's 8-inch howitzers got really busy with Scherpenberg; he proceeded systematically to do in all those huts. Luckily for me I was having a Europe morning, and when the first flight arrived I happened to be shaving instead of having breakfast. That first flight killed Horne, who had commanded the Seaforths for years, Rose, the brigade major of the gunners, and a padre who had been with the division for a very long time. We also lost Cartwright, our gas sergeant, a perfectly splendid fellow who was as nearly indispensable as any man can be.

We were not sorry to shift from Scherpenberg that night to take up a position behind our people in the Vierstraat line. Next day we were relieved by another division north of the canal, and the day after we took over a new line next door to the French who were now holding Kemmel. The French had made a most gallant but unsuccessful attack on Spanbrokmolan the day

before—if only they had co-operated with the Seaforths!

We were diverted by the French method of light signals. On looking down a very formidable list of signals which they sent us, we noticed that, among other things, a pink caterpillar was "of no special significance." The first night that we were in there was rather an abnormal bombardment, during which a constant cascade of lights of every colour in the rainbow was sent up from the French front line. On making inquiries we were told that the situation was normal!

It was obvious that the Boche had a tremendous lot of guns. For he shelled everywhere and everything, giving our batteries perfect hell. We noticed, too, that he was paying special attention to Kemmel village, for all day and all night he shelled it with 5·9-inches. The result was—a fact he had been working for, no doubt—that the French gradually sidestepped away from this extremely unhealthy neighbourhood, some of them crowding into our area. And I am convinced that when the Boche did finally attack Kemmel he found no one to receive him in Kemmel village.

Of course, by holding Wytchett, Spanbromolan, and Madelslade Crater, the enemy simply looked right into our line, and moving about by day was exciting, to say the least of it. I think the front line was the safest place to be

in, though it was a job to get there. We had one battalion holding the front line, one in support about the Kemmel-Vierstraat Road, and one back in reserve. We came to the conclusion that the troops in front of us were not first class, though the sniping was fierce by Madelslade Crater. And since our position was impossible, overlooked as we were from all sides, it was decided to retake Wytchett Ridge and Spanbrokmolan. The Lowland Brigade was detailed for the job, and, as was normally the case with the wretched three-battalion system, the Black Watch were lent to us for the occasion.

Our attack was to take place on the 26th, and we were to have the assistance of tanks, which might have shown us that the attack would not come off! We worked feverishly at forming our dumps, and the last mule carrying the last load had just got clear, when—the Boche started his attack. Smoke and gas, gas and smoke, went on all night (the night of the 24/25th). The French on our right must have been broken early, for one of our how. batteries which had been covering them soon found itself in unpleasant proximity to the Boche. By 7 A.M. the 12th Royal Scots had beaten back the Boche once more to his front line, and these Bavarians had received such a rebuff that they didn't dare to come out again until the 12th had been surrounded. The last

news we heard of those three companies in the front line was from a patrol which had been sent out early, and after a long absence came back to find our front line a seething mass of Boches who, with loud shouts of vengeance, were killing everyone they came across, including the wounded. But they didn't kill everyone, for two wounded officers were afterwards reported in Germany, and a third, Saunderson, who had been buried by a shell in his bit of dug-out, was afterwards rescued and taken prisoner.

Sammy, in temporary command of the 12th, had a narrow escape. For the Boche, as soon as he had captured Kemmel, came pouring into and behind our right flank, killing the stretcher-bearers in the aid-post near Irish Farm. They scuppered the reserve company under Skinner, who was killed while fighting gallantly, and they very nearly caught the 12th Royal Scots battalion headquarters. S— was wounded and lay on the floor for some time, the Boche passing him. But later one of his stretcher-bearers found him and brought him back to our lines.

The Borderers in support fared almost as badly, for their battalion headquarters was scuppered, W— and H—, their C.O. and adjutant, wounded and captured, and the two forward companies in the Vierstraat line were fighting back to back for a long time. The

other two companies had been ordered by me, in case of trouble, to hold Beaver Corner, a very important position. These two companies carried out their orders to the letter, not only holding their own but sallying forth under C—, and capturing fifty-eight prisoners—about all the prisoners that were captured that day! I am convinced that the splendid stand of the 12th Royal Scots in their front line saved us from irreparable disaster; for it gave us time to fling in the 11th Royal Scots and after them the Watch, preventing the Boche from encircling La Clytte, which he had nearly succeeded in doing. The Boche didn't trust his men; for the Borderers saw his main body marching in column of fours along the road quite close to the first line troops!

The Borderers that day indulged in the best Boche shooting they had ever had. A very proud and gigantic Percy purred 'round our brigade headquarters all day. One of his shells landed under the room where P—, our intelligence, was shaving; a few more made the little house rock so much that we were forced to quit.

H—, the staff-captain, had a miraculous escape. A Percy must have burst right at his feet, for it flung him yards away, where he was picked up long after, unconscious but otherwise undamaged. Later on, in ignorance

of this *contretemps*, while talking to H—— who babbled incoherently, I came sorrowfully to the conclusion that another jolly good fellow would have to go down for a rest!

We were relieved that night by all kinds of oddments, and next morning I found myself commanding a regiment of Australian mounted troops who were flung in near Ridgewood to stem the flowing tide in that quarter. The Scottish Rifles, who had come back to us, were placed next door to them. They had very heavy fighting all day, for things were none too rosy in the north. The South African Brigade had now become a battalion, the brigade being formed by the Scottish Rifles and the Royal Scots Fusiliers, of 7th and 30th divisional fame.

We were worried a good deal by hostile planes all that day, but I think we made them pay for over-boldness. Next day we moved to Poperinghe, where we spent an evil time, for our headquarters was in a rest camp near the railway station, and Percy shot diligently into our camp. The battalions who were in the town were better off, though Poperinghe was fairly unhealthy.

We were shortly moved to Watou, which we found packed with French troops. That night, the night of the 28/29th, the Boche gave the French a terrific bombardment and then attacked in the early morning. He captured

Scherpenberg, Mont Rouge, and Mont Noir, but the French retook it by a brilliant counter-attack. That was the high-water mark of the Boche success in the north ; it had been a very near thing, and had he succeeded in maintaining himself on those three hills I think he would have got the Channel ports. But it was not to be ; he had frittered away his reserves in vain, and it was shortly to be our turn. We were all perfectly confident that the French would hold him, for was not the Kaiser reported to be watching the battle, and he always brought us good luck !

We had an opportunity while at Watou of hearing all about the splendid fight which the Camerons had put up at the Damstrasse. They, the Watch, and the Seaforths were hard put to it to hold their own on the 25th, but they succeeded in doing so.

The division was then relieved, and by very easy stages we wandered right away back until we found ourselves at Lumbres, a country of magnificent ranges and ideal training grounds. We were all under canvas and the weather was delightful. In addition to shooting we spent a good deal of time in training the men to skirmish across any sort of country, the more difficult the better. We were lucky enough to discover some hedgerow country, and consequently we had the opportunity of tackling the problem of getting over or through a stake-and-bound fence, in

fighting order. It was also demonstrated what a trap for the unwary a gap or a gate might be. As a result of this training we all came to the conclusion that with the aid of barbed wire the average stake-and-binder was an ideal obstacle, which it would be criminal folly to cut down with a view to clearing the foreground, except in very exceptional circumstances. For, by taking thought in the placing of Lewis guns in inconspicuous positions at the corners, one could make a hedgerow a costly business to the attacker since he would have to negotiate an almost insurmountable obstacle.

After we had been relieved the commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig, sent us a message which was conveyed to all ranks, to the effect that both he and Marshal Foch wished the 9th Division to know that it was due to their magnificent resistance that the Allies had not been forced to withdraw to a line in rear of St Omer and to flood the country in front of St Omer.

CHAPTER XIII

METEREN AND HOOGENACKER RIDGE—1918.

AFTER a fortnight at Lumbres we relieved a very tired division in the Meteren sector. That is to say, our centre (of the division) was just on the outskirts of Meteren; our right joined up with the Australians, and our left with the French near Fontaine Hoek. The Boche had complete observation of all our comings out and goings in from the village of Meteren. And, since the division which we relieved had been battle fighting, not much work had been done on the line, which consisted of a series of outposts. Now outposts are all very well in open warfare where their position is only a temporary matter. In stationary warfare they are hopeless—that is to say, a series of detached posts are a great mistake for two reasons which alone need be mentioned, though there are others. The Boche learns their whereabouts and he can blow them to hell, or he can cut off and capture or kill the garrison without people behind knowing what is going on. It is absolutely essential,

therefore, to have a continuous line where it is possible to side-step if occasion should arise.

We worked our line as follows. The South African Brigade, now reconstructed by means of the Scottish Rifles and Scots Fusiliers, was permanently on the right. We were permanently on the left, while the Highlanders were a swinging brigade. We, all three brigades, did twelve days in the trenches and six days out at Hondghem. Each brigade had two battalions actually in the line with one battalion in close support.

It was a pleasant line—hills and dales and hedgerow country dotted about with hopyards. The hedgerows made it possible for us to do a lot of daylight patrols, and—it was the very best time of the year to be in the trenches. When we first went in the wind was high, as an attack was expected. The Boche certainly had evil intentions, and he used to shell and mortar us a good deal, especially at night; also there was gas shelling. The Boche had realised at last what we had known for years—the splendid value of nightly harassing fire. Of course we pitched it over as well, and about two to his one, but he had evidently tumbled to the fact that harassing ration and working parties at night causes enormous casualties without there being anything to show for it. Of course he was a hide-bound old Tory, as were we in not changing his hours more frequently but always opening up at a certain time.

During our stay in the Meteren sector the swing in the pendulum from his offensive to our own was fairly well defined, for in June and July we had every reason to expect an attack. His hospitals and aerodromes were numerous, his dumps were everywhere, and all information pointed to his fixed intention to renew his assaults with a view to getting the Channel ports. Defence schemes were a prominent feature of life's little worries at this time. Now, as explained before, the country we were in consisted of a hedgerow *terrain*, just such as one would find at home; and the only guide to hedgerow fighting which can be found in history is that mentioned in connection with the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century; where, to quote Gardiner, "Every field was like a little fort to be fought for and won before proceeding to the next." We had found that out when training back at Lumbres. The finest obstacle in all the world was provided by nature; which meant that people safely ensconced behind those obstacles were practically immune from hostile shell fire, provided they did not advertise their presence by digging obvious "Hi Hi" pits for all the world, including aeroplanes, to see. For the gunner cannot shell everything on spec, it is too expensive in ammunition. Consequently our defence scheme was largely based on utilising hedgerows without advertising the fact.

Imagine our fury when going round the back lines one morning to find all our pet hedgerows—levelled; and in their room lengths of barbed wire and trenches, the whole structure simply shouting to the Boche exactly where he could find us. Luckily in the more forward areas we were left alone, and I gave orders to shoot anyone who dared to touch a twig of hedgerows in the front line.

The infantry man is the Queen Bee of all that box of tricks—air force, gunners, sappers, tanks, and so on—which composes an army; for in the end it is the infantry man who stems the rush or captures and secures the ridge. Without him no battles will be won, no hostile offensives frustrated. Therefore, when the commander of that much-put-upon branch of the Service asks for anything, his views must surely be worth consideration. If they are not, why, kick him out; there are hundreds of better men to replace him. The one important branch of study in war, a branch which is always neglected, is the study of psychology. Learn your men, peer into their inmost souls to share their feelings: that is the way to become a successful leader.

In June our great source of excitement lay in our dealings with the French, for we used to get volumes of literature which had to be translated, all dealing with such matters as

overlapping barrage lines, poaching on their preserves, hints on the desirability of capturing Meteren, and so on. To all of this we used to reply by a visit in person.

Of course the place was stiff with liaison people. Our brigade headquarters in the early days of our stay at Meteren was a very prominent, insecure farmhouse in full view of the Boche. This house simply bristled with Frenchmen, though one could never quite fathom what they were intended for. Their knowledge of the English language was scanty, so that our conversation was usually confined to morning and evening salutations. The French regimental officer is a real good fellow, practically without exception. T_____, who commanded the company of the 11th Royal Scots which was next door to the French, made a point of introducing a little ceremony when he relieved the liaison post which we shared with them. Every night the company used to march out and solemnly present arms to the French in No-Man's-Land as they relieved their own people. The French loved it; they always greatly appreciate that sort of thing.

It took us a long time before we had made a continuous front line, and, until it was completed, going round the front line in daylight was a most exciting experience, and of course we lost a lot of men who would walk

about by day. We were urged to deeds of valour in the shape of raids as soon as we got into the line: in vain we pointed out that it was a case of "hasten slowly," for all three battalions were chiefly composed of young boys who knew not the meaning of war. They had to be taught everything; they could no more complete a standard task of digging when we first went in than they could fly.

The trench discipline, or lack of it, simply made one cry in those early days, and therefore we were hardly on the same level as the Australians next door, with whom we were compared to our great disadvantage. One day a staff officer on a visit brought up this thorny subject of raids, drawing attention to the fact that the Australians had done so many. He refused to believe that they had a more suitable front than ours for raiding until he was asked how many successful raids the Australians had pulled off when they held our front. The answer was "not one." They were fine fellows the Australians, none finer; but in common fairness to our people it must be remembered that we had been most frightfully hammered in the spring, and they had been let off, by pure good fortune as it happened. Also, one can do a great deal more when there are four battalions in a brigade. Yet the fact remains that we

never failed to get an identification every tour of trench duty during those three months we were in the line, which is not altogether a bad record. It is true we had our checks. The 12th, now commanded by J—— M——, whom we had picked up by pure luck, had a bitter disappointment in finding the Boches absolutely ready for them, but they afterwards brought off a brilliant little *coup* which bears recounting. The place selected was a line of trenches just behind a hedgerow. For some days we tamed the Boche by sending over gas projectors, which made him put his mask on, accompanying the flight of the projectors by a sharp bombardment of smoke which blotted out the view. Then, having got him quite accustomed to it we went over. Some of the prisoners started picking quarrels with our men, at least so the men said, and they had to slay them. A week later in the battle of Meteren the Watch had about 800 casualties at this hedge, which the Boches had *not* cut down, but merely stiffened with wire. It was a great pity that we had stirred them up, but we didn't know at the time of the raid that an offensive was contemplated, because it was kept a profound secret.

There was a knoll which faced the high ground by Meteren Mill. On this knoll the Boche had made a strong point. It was in

the 11th Royal Scots front, and one morning at 8 A.M. we concentrated the fire of every Stokes gun in the division on this knoll, at the same time putting down a smoke screen. Two parties went over; the left one under Theobald was back with its cargo of prisoners in three minutes, but the right had a fight straight away, a regular dog fight in which the bayonet was used freely, and in which Sneddon, our best full back, and little Mathieson, a gem of a subaltern, were killed. The extraordinary incident occurred of several prisoners who had been captured by this party finding no one to receive them in our lines running back to their own lines, for Sneddon, who was in charge of the reception party, seeing that the day was going badly for us, rushed blindly out to his death, taking his escort with him.

On the 17th July we were informed at a divisional conference that the 9th Division were to resume the offensive. The battle of Meteren, only a minor operation in itself, had rather important results, for it cramped the enemy's style considerably through our capturing vast quantities of T.M. ammunition which he had laboriously brought up, and which he had intended to use in his offensive against us—an offensive which we had much pleasure in anticipating. The attack was made by the 28th Brigade on the right and the Highlanders

on the left. The Australians helped us with their guns, and as soon as we had completed the capture of Meteren they got busy in the low ground too. We attacked at 7.55 A.M., and the smoke was so thick that one could see very little as a spectator.

The Boche expected us all right, but not from the quarter from which we launched the attack, for he was looking out to the west, whereas we attacked from the north. We heard this afterwards from a gunner observing-officer whom we captured in Meteren, and who came back with the divisional commander and myself. Immediately the place was captured the divisional commander rushed off on his bike, taking me with him. On our way we passed any number of Boche dead, a real good killing, and not too many of our fellows, in the village; though, as mentioned previously, the Watch were held up for a long time owing to that distressful hedgerow.

The divisional commander captured a prisoner, as he usually did on these occasions. We were skulking along beside the knoll against which machine guns were becoming unpleasant, when, looking round, I saw him dart forward into a ditch with a funny little pistol, which I always told him would only annoy anyone if he fired it, and retrieve a Boche who had been shamming dead.

On reaching the village we got up on what

was left of the church and gazed around. For months the divisional commander had insisted on a systematic strafing of the village by the heavy gunners. It took him quite a long time to impress the necessity of this on the heavy people; but patience was eventually rewarded, and finally, as was always the case, he got exactly what he wanted. This was nothing less than the complete levelling of the village, so that not one stone should stand upon another, for he knew that we should never take that village if the houses, in good repair when we first arrived, were allowed to remain so. Also walls interfere with the barrage and make it dangerous for our own people. So day and night our heavies had been punching Meteren, and on that Friday morning, 19th July, as we stood on the bundle of bricks which represented the church we saw the result. The village was flat! Then, as we gazed across at Hoogenacker Ridge we could see what a complete rout it had been. For the Boche had gone completely, and there was nothing to stop our taking Hoogenacker too: the trouble would have been to hold it, as at that time our line to the south was miles in rear and we should have been in an impossible salient. But we could now see that if we might get Hoogenacker we would force him out of the salient which he had made for himself in April, for from Hoogenacker one could see all over

the Boche lines for miles. Looking backwards we were astonished at the splendid observation which the Boche must have had of our lines. He could see everything from Meteren, and we were surprised that he had not strafed us more than he had.

It was the turn of the Lowland Brigade to take Hoogenacker, and, as we knew it must be ours, we began to make our preparations, but first we had to repulse the Boche's last offensive in the north ; for on the first night that we took over he attacked our posts near Gaza cross-roads, the brunt of the attack falling on the 11th Royal Scots, as usual, though the Borderers got it pretty stiff too. The attack was preceded by a fierce bombardment which, happening to take place in the middle of a brigade relief (we were relieving the 28th Brigade), was a great trial. The Boche went clean through the posts held by the 11th Royal Scots, and for some time they were fighting both ways. He established himself in an enclosure well behind our front line. On going round early that morning for the first time we were present at the final cleaning up of that enclosure. We lost Keane and Mann, two splendid officers, as the result of that attack, but we gained most important identifications, as we discovered a fresh division, the 12th, which had the reputation of being a first-class storm-division.

Next night the enemy gave us a heavier bombardment with a great deal of gas, and attacked again. This time he shoved in six companies on a narrow front opposite the 11th Royal Scots again. Once more he took it in the neck, losing heavily, and again we got prisoners who wandered right through our lines into the enclosure. After this we worked like beavers to make a continuous line instead of these isolated posts. Of course the Boche thought we were doing this merely for defensive reasons, but as a matter of fact we were making an assembly trench so that we could surprise him by attacking at a time when he would not be expecting us. We were dreadfully overlooked by a ruined house just at the edge of Hoogenacker Ridge, and we took this house by peaceful penetration. At least the whole of one afternoon the gunners quietly shelled it, and then, in the cool of the evening, the 12th Royal Scots went calmly over and took it. The owners bolted. The 11th were booted out of it one morning, but immediately counter-attacked and retook it. Poor Faulkner of the 11th Royal Scots was killed, and Teuton and Ramsay, two other officers of the 11th, were wounded.

On our right there ran my old friend the Meteren Becque which, when we first took over this bit of the line, formed our right boundary. Shortly afterwards the Australians left us to

go south, the 29th Division taking their place, and as soon as they came in we extended our line a bit in order to get astride the Meteren Becque. I knew this becque pretty well for I had frequently bathed in it near this very spot when we were out at rest in 1915-16. It was a muddy stream about ten feet wide, and it might be considered impassable. One morning I waded up its noisome depths in order to get a look at the Hoogenacker Ridge which faced west; for the ridge on our immediate front faced north, curving back parallel to the becque as far as Outersteene village, after which it gradually sloped down to the level of the low-lying country. It was a peculiarly unpleasant expedition, since there were many dead Boches floating about, but it gave one the opportunity of seeing well into the enemy's position.

Just before leaving, the Australians had shoved their line forward as far as Merris with the result that the Boche had only a few posts on the west side of the becque; his main position—that part of the ridge which faced westward—extending from the river bank to the top of the ridge, a difficult nut to crack. It was decided, therefore, to attack it from the north. The Lowland Brigade—the old original Lowland Brigade, for the Scottish Rifles were lent to us for the occasion—was told to do the job. It was arranged that a mopping-up party

of the 29th Division should go along the west bank parallel to the main attack, in order to get hold of any party of Boches who might be on that side of the river. It was also arranged that, as soon as we had stormed the ridge, two companies of the 29th Division should exploit through the village of Outersteene.

Just before the attack a sergeant of the 12th Royal Scots, while visiting one of the posts which we had thrown out in order to ensure that the Boche machine-gunner didn't creep so close in that he could avoid our barrage, was wounded and captured. As a matter of fact the Boche managed to succeed in creeping up, thanks to the presence of standing corn. Luckily, however, we had a supplementary barrage of Stokes mortars; and afterwards we found three groups of Boche machine-gunners, all killed by the Stokes bombardment as they crouched in their tiny shelters. One could not help admiring these good troops who had gone to practically certain death by order.

At this time I had the great and only Teddy Mac. shooting for me; and he was of the utmost possible assistance, for his opinions were always sound, and at working out small details of barrage fire he was incomparable.

Our barrage for the Hoogenacker show was a pretty useful one; for, since we could shoot at him from two sides—that is from the north where he faced my main attack, and also from

the west where he faced Merris — we could enfilade the bit which faced north by shooting from the west, while at the same time we could apply a creeping barrage for the main attack from the north by shooting square from the north. From the west, therefore, we applied a rolling barrage, that is to say a barrage just exactly on the same principle as rolling a lawn. Of course this barrage had to be well forward of the advancing infantry so as not to cramp their style. It consisted of sixty-pounders firing shrapnel, eighteen-pounders, and 4·5-inch hows. firing H.E., and crowds of machine guns. For we had observed that most of the hedgerows ran from the becque to the top of the ridge, that is to say east and west. Consequently a shoot from the west enfiladed all these hedgerows.

The barrage from the north was a creeper of eighteen-pounders firing H.E. and smoke, the guns placed absolutely square on their task, a very important point since it ensures accurate lifts, with less chance of shorts among our infantry, and consequently allows them to get close up under its shelter. Of course, as we all know, the 9th Division would have nothing but H.E. barrage and smoke for a creeper. This was no fad of our gunners, but it was what we infantry—and I am talking of the rank and file—insisted upon. We were educated up to it; and now that we had the 106 fuse with its

abnormal instantaneous effect, there was no comparison between a shrapnel creeper and a H.E. creeper. It is hardly necessary to state that the 106 had no back lash, so that we could get right up under its tender care.

In addition to all these machine guns firing from the west we had a goodly number firing from the north as well. Their rôle was to build up a wall of steel on our left flank ; for as soon as ever we advanced this left flank was in the air. It was possible that the Boche might push in something against this flank as we went forward, but it was thought that grazing fire from these numerous machine guns might cool his ardour.

There was, of course, the usual counter-battery work. Two nights before the attack the Boche indulged in extraordinary antics ; he shelled his own line vigorously for quite a long time. His forward line was evidently packed with his own people, who showed their resentment at this treatment by sending up a positive Brock's benefit of lights ; but that didn't seem to worry his gunners. It also put the lid on a raiding party of his which one of our posts found assembling just outside their post. However, a barrage of 5·9-inches quelled their ardour.

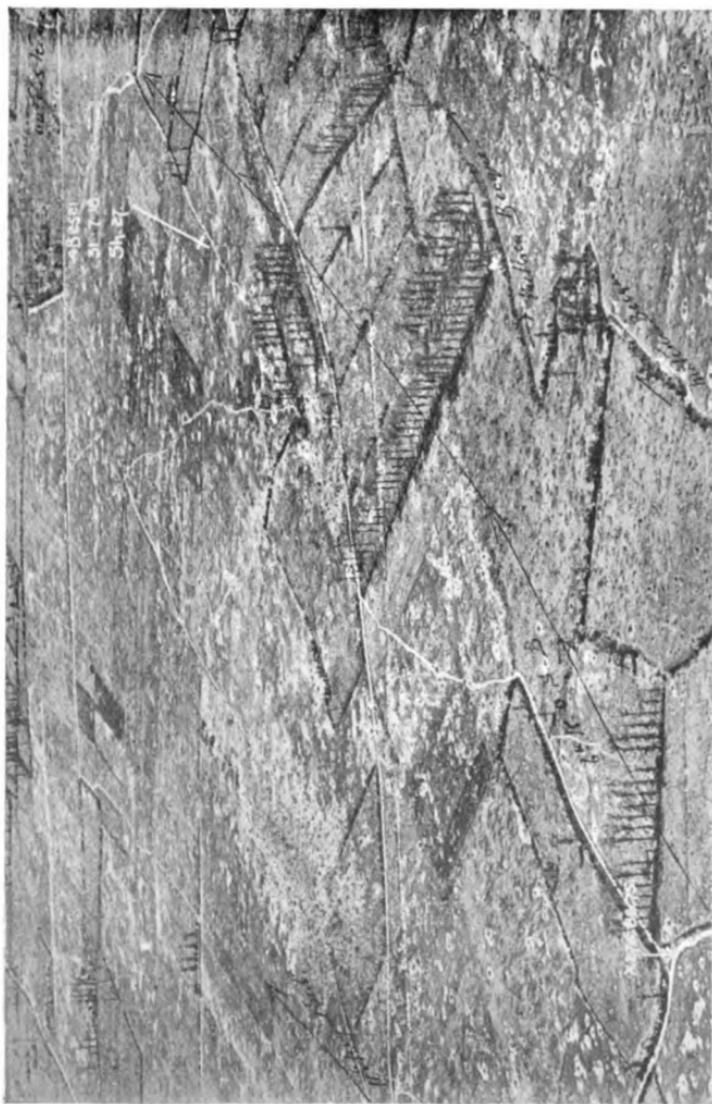
We had made strong representations to be allowed to attack at 10 A.M. since we happened to know that this was the time when the Boche's

vigilance was on the wane, owing to the hot weather, which had a soporific effect on his sentries. At least we gathered this from going round our own line and watching our own sentries. What is sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose ; and, human nature being alike whether the proverb is applied to Briton or to Boche, we argued that we should surprise him by going at that hour of the morning. Another good reason for attacking in the middle of the day lies in the fact that the average man is then at his best for a test of endurance.

We got over the difficulty of concealing all these men in one trench by camouflaging the places which were normally empty, but which now had their quota of men, with strips of matting painted to resemble the shadow. The division had done this before at Meteren with success. At dawn on the morning of the attack a very inquisitive Boche plane came over. We had allowed for this, however, by having certain picked crews of Lewis gunners, not more than usual, but those detailed to fire really first-class shots. We had already downed one inquisitive fellow—at least we, in conjunction with the entire division with the exception of the A.S.C., had claimed him ; so that when this bird came over it was nothing very abnormal to give him snuff which sent him reeling homewards. Then followed a period of intense anxiety. Had he spotted us ? There was dead silence until zero

answered that question. The Borderers attacked on the right, the 11th Royal Scots in the centre, and the Scottish Rifles on the left. The rôle of the latter was to drop a flank guard composed of a number of posts to refuse our exposed left flank. We gave the men two minutes to scramble out of their trenches and form up, and during those two minutes a perfect witch's cauldron of smoke was pumping on to that unlucky ridge. Then the barrage lifted—it went that day at 100 yards in two minutes with a longer halt on a sunken road, for if the weather is right one cannot have the pace too fast. And so it was in this case; for the 11th Royal Scots went scrambling up the hill at such a rate that they ran into their own barrage. The Borderers, led by S— of the one arm, caught it very badly on the right; for the Boche put down a heavy 5·9 barrage with strict impartiality on his own folk as well as on our own. But even then his splendid machine-gunners functioned, until one of the Borderers rushed forward with his Lewis gun, firing it as he went.

Eventually the Borderers got their objectives, and, without waiting, rushed on far in front, clearing the village of Outersteene. Another lot of Borderers, this time the 1st battalion of the 29th Division, came through this crowd of ours, and, together with other troops of the 29th Division, made good the capture of the village of Outersteene.



HOOGENACKER RIDGE.

(To face page 246.)

From the top of the ridge near Hoogenacker Mill one had a splendid view of the Lys Valley, and we now had observation right into the back door of Bailleul, as it were, for we could see his heavies pounding away at our newly captured ridge for all they were worth. The shelling was fierce all that day and night and the greater part of next day as well. It wasn't proper, accurate shelling on well-defined barrage lines, but an area shoot which made it unsafe to wander anywhere. From the mill we could see a low ridge, absolutely the last ridge before the Lys was reached, and behind that ridge the Boche collected for a counter-attack. He didn't really bring it off till next day, when Teddy was quite prepared for him with his guns, and the Boche got such a dusting that he left us alone after that.

In an extraordinarily short time our fellows dug a continuous line of over 2000 yards, and this enabled us to move about by day. The enemy gassed us a good deal and generally showed all the normal signs of extreme windiness, among other little hate items in which he used to indulge being a shoot on Fletre Château with purring Percies.

CHAPTER XIV

THE END OF THE SALIENT.—1918

METEREN and Hoogenacker had shown us that the need for training in open warfare, as opposed to the trench system, was pressing and urgent. Fortunately we got the chance to train in September and we took full advantage of it. We were convinced of the necessity of teaching our people how to act on very wide extensions, even in comparatively close country ; for, we argued, if a battalion had been taught to manœuvre on a frontage of 1000 yards, that battalion would find it an easy matter to deploy and manœuvre on a much narrower front. In other words, if you have been taught to expand you can easily contract ; whereas the other way on is not always the case. Hitherto we had been rather inclined to go the other way on. What really brought the matter home to us was this three-battalion system in which we were forced to expand our frontage willy-nilly.

Another lesson which we had learnt was the criminal folly of deploying before the last

possible moment. That, indeed, was a principle which had often been overlooked in this war by people who thought that they were competent to improve on principles, when indeed they were utterly incompetent to handle even a corporal's guard. And further, we found in the year of grace 1918 that widely extended lines of infantry could be replaced largely by tiny columns in single file, the smallest command, which again is the only possible number which can be handled by one man, the section.

But we found that we wanted something more than this. What of the people who were nearest to the enemy during an advance? Were small columns, however small, entirely suitable in a close country, for example, where there is a possibility of a machine gun lying for you in ambush? From time immemorial, columns, of whatever size, have always been covered by skirmishers. Now one was, and is, convinced that the art of skirmishing was lost to us after the Peninsular War, and that we have no idea what really good skirmishing is; and giving one's mind to this all-absorbing subject one began to work out a system based on the following:—

In the first place, a line of men extended at very wide intervals is simply asking for trouble. They are no protection, for they always get lost; they are no menace to an

enemy, who merely has to cut them off; and they have no confidence in themselves, since man, especially if he is town-bred as most of our people are, is a gregarious animal, and is consequently completely out of his element when by himself in close country—the only country you need consider in training, since any man who is trained in close country will find no difficulty in open country. The fact is self-evident. And then we choose Aldershot for training our men to fight in a close country, and afterwards wonder why we do not usually meet with initial success in close-country fighting! And if we are agreed that we must have these wide extensions, and that we must have men together, it follows that we must work those men in pairs—"mates" they used to call themselves; men who always work together, but who do not keep together like a pair of plough-horses, for while one man goes forward he is *always* covered by the other fellow's rifle if the country is close and there is a possibility of ambush.

That is what skirmishing means, and, as anyone can see, it demands very high training—training which we had no time to give our fellows while we were in the middle of the big war, but which we must give our fellows to make them top dog in the next war, little or big. Of course we hardly touched the

matter during those few weeks, but what bucked us up and made us hopeful was the keenness of the men on the subject of "mates" as they promptly called it. And when you have got the men interested in a subject half the difficulties are smoothed out.

There was too much of the football scrum in our battles, especially in the earlier battles. It was frightfully expensive, in that it cost us the flower of the nation—simply because we were not properly trained. Is it not worth while, then, while the lessons of the war are fresh, to burn into our minds what we have learnt; stuff which we regimental officers have come by as the result of actual battle experience?

So we went up to Ypres with a number of lessons in our minds—like Mr Backsight Forethought—as the result of making a succession of howlers during that open war training. The 28th Brigade (the South Africans had re-formed their brigade and were moved to another division, for which we were very sorry) were to attack on the right, the Highlanders were to attack on the left, with the Belgians on their left again, while we were in reserve. The 9th Division was to attack on the line Kit-kat-Anzac-Broodseinde Ridge, starting from just clear of Ypres itself, while we were to be prepared to exploit either northwards to Passchendaele if the Belgians failed to get on,

or southwards to Becelaere. The night before the attack we spent near Dirty Bucket Corner, where we got well bombed. Then next morning, at 5.30 A.M. on the 28th September, we began an advance which did not end until we had crossed the Rhine.

The divisional commander took me with him in his car ahead of the brigade to see how things were going, and as far as we could judge all seemed to be going well, though the rain was coming down in sheets. We didn't get very far in the car, which soon got ditched near Potijze, so out we had to get and footslog the rest of the way. The going reminded one of Hades on a wet day, and though it was cold we were in a muck-sweat before we had walked half a mile.

On reaching Kit-kat we watched the advance to the second objective, which we thought looked dreadfully slow: our smoke-screen was good though. After a bit we moved forward, though not until we were informed that the Lowland Brigade were in position about Kit-kat, our assembly place. We reached Broodseinde just after it had been taken, and from the ridge we had an uninterrupted view of all we had fought for in 1917. It seemed incredible that we had got it.

A fight was still raging round Polygon Butt, where the Bavarians had thrown in their last brigade, but the divisional commander was able

to send back word that the time for cavalry had come. There were two French cavalry corps behind us somewhere, but, owing no doubt to the appalling condition of the Zonnebeke road, the only possible means of communication, they did not appear until well on in the following day. Imagine a wasp struggling through toffee which is deep enough to drown him, and you can have some idea of what that Zonnebeke road was to a horse: and not only that; it was jammed so tight that not a soul on the road for miles and hours was able to move an inch. That was our sole means of communication across a country which was as impassable to a horse or to gun limber as the Channel.

It is hardly to be wondered, then, that for days we fought practically gunless, relying entirely on our rifles. Even Lewis guns were not much use; for the poor lad whose fate it was to hump a Lewis gun just sank beneath its weight from sheer exhaustion in that horrible slime. As far as we could see, things looked fairly bright in the Passchendaele direction, so I was ordered to go along the ridge to the south and capture Becelaere. Things were not quite so bad on the Broodseinde-Becelaere road. We formed up on either side of this road; the 12th Royal Scots on the right and the 11th Royal Scots on the left, with the Borderers in reserve, and, keeping the road as

a dividing line, we fought our way down towards the village. We had arranged that when both assaulting battalions were in position they were to fire two Véry lights in rapid succession, after which the brigade representative in the centre would fire a green light, which was the signal for the whole line to advance.

We adopted this method all through the advance, and on this particular day it helped others besides ourselves, for C——, our liaison officer with the 29th Division, saw our signals and was able to tell the 29th our exact whereabouts from time to time until we got touch with them. For we had to make a very long outward sweep, and consequently, as they were well on the inner flank, it was only natural that there should be a gap. While we were advancing it was rather unsettling to see the devil of a fight raging in our immediate rear somewhere near Zandvoorde.

The Boche slipped in his big counter-attack against us just before we reached Becelaere. His infantry weren't for it, but his gunners and all three batteries came racing up the slope, swinging into action, and began firing over open sights. They knocked out a lot of the 11th and many valuable mules as well. Finally only one officer was left serving his gun: him we captured, and the 11th Royal Scots said he ought to have been awarded the V.C. for his very gallant fight.

We had everything on packs, our water, Stokes mortars, ammunition and machine guns. As soon as we had captured Becelaere and the ridge to the north of it we consolidated our position and waited for daylight, all our packs dumping their loads and then going back to Ypres for rations which were duly brought up that night—a fine effort on the part of H_____, our energetic staff-captain. For the Zonnebeke road was impassable, blocked for miles and miles by the Belgians and ourselves.

To add to the joy of things for people doomed to camp out on that road, the Boche night-bombers came along in swarms, and the bombs thundered down all through the night. Next morning we expected to find the road a mere shambles; as a matter of fact they had killed an enormous number of horses, but very few men. As I was going round our lines with the Bart. the Boche suddenly sprang a fierce barrage of light bombs from planes a vast height above us, and it was too near to be pleasant.

In the middle of the night I was ordered to meet representatives of the Ulster Division at Polygon Butt. I found that they were to advance through us next day and take Terhand. We fixed things up as best we could, but we were relieved to find that the attack had been postponed to 9 A.M., which gave us time to get round at dawn in order to complete the recon-

naissance of the previous night. The 28th Brigade were to attack the Keiburg spur with the Belgians on their left, while the other two brigades were to come along in support, the Lowlanders on the right and the Highlanders on the left. I didn't like the look of Terhand away off our right flank, so I kept my reserve battalion, the 12th Royal Scots, who had captured Bevelaere, echeloned on that flank.

The fighting was very difficult to follow. We knew that things were not going right at Terhand Ridge, from which a number of wounded men were coming back. But in the north they seemed all right, and we could see the Camerons, thrown in from the south to assist the Belgians who were badly hung up, swarm into the village of Moorslede. A fierce machine-gun fire from Terhand kept us watchful of that flank, but as soon as the 28th had got Keiburg our two assault battalions were slipped to join in the hunt. "Back each other up" were the orders we got that day, and—well, it was just like nothing on earth that we had ever done! For the whole division went streaming off into the Blue, hunting the Boche away from any position in which he might have held us up for weeks. Nothing could stop our men that day. Finally, in the twilight, they swept through Dadizeele and on to the Menin-Roulers road, along which Boche staff cars and other impedimenta were humming with undignified haste. It is an

extraordinarily difficult thing to shoot anyone in a motor car.

There had been a regular dog fight in Dadizeele which the Boche should not have allowed us to take so easily, for we had no artillery. We forestalled his somewhat belated counter-attack with a cavalry division which he brought up by train to Ledeghem. We met this attack just as we reached the Menin-Roulers road, and, though we had no difficulty in repelling his infantry, the machine-gun fire was terrific, and he also had plenty of guns of every size and calibre, while we had none at all on our right! For, as mentioned before, we had left them far behind struggling in that terrible slough of despond. We had broken right through one of his most important defence systems in those regions, and, as we walked up over the Strooiboomhoek Ridge, we were lost in admiration of the gallant manner in which our lads had rushed this extremely strong natural position, made doubly so by acres of wire and well-sited trenches.

That night we took shelter in a funny little ammunition shelter which the Boche plastered with shells; also, to add to the extreme discomfort of things, it poured with rain. We found our first civilians in Dadizeele, and, as usual, the oldest inhabitant was called upon to give us some information of the district. Dadizeele had been knocked about a bit by our

artillery in the offensive of 1917, though the church, an imposing structure, was practically untouched. This church, like most other churches in Flanders, had received the mark of the beast, for it had been used as a stable. O——, the Roman Catholic padre, when later on in conversation with a Boche padre of the same persuasion, took him to task for the disgraceful treatment of churches by his countrymen in France and Flanders. "But," retorted the Boche, "you forget that the French stabled their horses in Cologne Cathedral in 1800." So, the Boche argued, he was therefore perfectly justified in indulging in a perfect orgie of sacrilege, and in stripping the churches bare of anything of value.

The Menin-Roulers road exactly resembled high-water mark on the beach, for west of that road the land was all shell-pitted; east of it there was barely a scratch, and all the land was under cultivation, all the farms were snug and comfortable, and civilians everywhere.

It simply pelted with rain the next day, and all that we could do was to make ourselves as comfortable as circumstances permitted, and then reconnoitre the ground. We met the great Teddy during the morning, and we were delighted to hear that he had succeeded in getting his brigade of guns safely over the swamp. Remember the swamp was about five miles long, so it was a pretty good

effort. He complained bitterly of the horses they were giving him, for, unlike the honest bus horse, they simply would not have it.

South of Dadizeele and away on my right flank—those cursed flanks!—was a little hill known as Hill 41. The hill should have been taken by the division on our right; unfortunately, however, the battalion which should have gone there got it into their heads that Dadizeele church spire was Terhand church spire, consequently they came right across into our water. And though every effort was made to correct these dispositions that night it was too late, for the Boche, when he slipped in his reinforcements—they arrived by train that night—immediately saw the supreme importance of Hill 41, and his retention of it cost us many casualties.

We shifted our brigade headquarters to a pill-box a few yards away from our uncomfortable little hidey-hole of the night before, and no sooner had we settled down in it than a C.O. of Irish Rifles asked us if we had any guns which could assist him to capture Hill 41, now giving his people no end of trouble. Naturally we were anxious to do all we could to help on the good work, but Teddy, on being asked what he could provide, was obliged to confess that it could be but little owing to shortage of ammunition. How-

ever, he worked out a plan, and so, under cover of a smoke-screen, the Irish Rifles took Hill 41, though, unfortunately, the Boche came back at them and retook most of it by nightfall.

Late that night we got orders to capture Ledeghem while the Highlanders were to take Rolleghem Capelle. The barrage for this attack took some rather careful arrangement, for we on the right were jutting out into the Blue, while the Highlanders were echeloned on our left rear in order to conform to the Belgians, who were even farther back still. It was to be a dawn attack, as we had no trenches in which to hide, and the ground offered no concealment from the enemy. It is easy to be wise after the event, but at the same time it was asking a good deal of our men to advance with both flanks enfiladed from strong positions, for Hill 41 raked our right the moment we jumped off, and the Highlanders got it on their left because the Belgians did not advance until three hours later. In spite of this, however, we got into Ledeghem all right, while the Highlanders, after storming another very strong system, went sailing off towards Rolleghem Capelle.

A little incident which happened at the junction of the two brigades is worthy of note. The Borderers were attacking on the right, the 12th Royal Scots on the left, with the 11th Royal Scots in reserve; but the Bart.

had been given a mission, which was to capture a pill-box-cum-farm known as Baum Farm, a very strong point which commanded our line of advance. It was taken very cleverly by A Company, which worked round to its rear under cover of a field gun run up quite close and punching it again and again at a range of 200 yards. Soon afterwards the same gunner officer led his section boldly out into the Blue and took on another pill-box which had been causing a lot of trouble; he succeeded in knocking it out though under heavy machine-gun fire at the time. For this he got the V.C.

The Borderers on the right had a bad time from the very start, owing to the enfilade machine-gun fire from Hill 41. The 12th Royal Scots swept through Ledeghem and established themselves beyond the village, and eventually, after heavy losses, the Borderers established themselves in the cemetery on the south side of the village. But the Boche had no intention of letting Ledeghem go so easily. A well-executed counter-attack from the south-east where there was no one to receive him—his second attempt that day—rolled us up and might have penetrated our line at Dadizeele had not the 1st Inniskillings just at the proper moment made a brilliant counter-attack, which saved the situation on our right. If only it had come sooner we

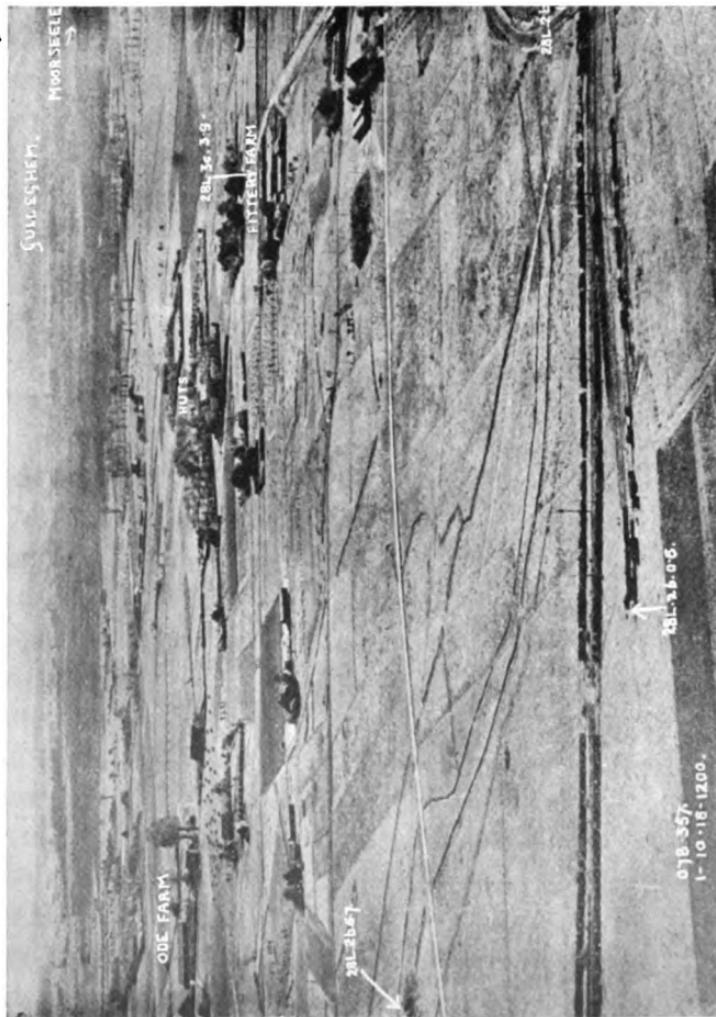
need never have quitted our hold on the south-east corner. So the end of that day saw us holding the station buildings of Ledeghem with our right flank still exposed, while the Highlanders consolidated their positions in the system which they had captured. It was a costly day for the 9th Division.

It must be mentioned that, during the morning, C—— of the Borderers repelled a counter-attack from the south-east while he was holding the cemetery. He saw the Boches coming in close column, led by mounted officers, at 1000 yards. He had four Lewis guns in this cemetery, and, getting the range to a yard, he turned them on. The attack simply melted away. That night we were relieved by the 28th Brigade, and next day we side-stepped and relieved the Highlanders. It was a most interesting bit of the line, for, as mentioned previously, we had got into the unshelled area, and so even in the front line we had a certain amount of comfort. The place was studded with pill-boxes which gave us shelter from the Boche shelling, but not from his gas, which at this time was very bad at night. We ourselves had a horrible, stuffy little hole into which we all crammed, and on the nights it was gassed the air was thick enough to cut with a blunt knife.

The next few days were spent in careful reconnaissances, pinching by peaceful penetration any pill-boxes and farms which would help us in our next advance. This advance, however, was delayed owing to the difficulties of bringing up ammunition and supplies through the Salient Swamp. We also had to wait for more guns. Waterdamhoek was not a pleasant spot during this wait, for, besides being at the joint of the British and Belgians, it was situated at the junction of numerous roads. The front line was easily the safest place to be in, for there lay all the pill-boxes, but farther back the Boche used to shell vigorously. His counter-battery work was better than ever, and caused our gunners heavy casualties. Also he used to night-bomb quite a lot, taking heavy toll of our horses. After a successful night-bombing stunt on the part of the Boche one would see horses lying about with dreadful wounds, but these wounds always in the same place. For a long time we wondered why, until one day we saw a party of Belgians engaged in the pleasant pastime of cutting off a juicy horse rump steak from the dead horses!

On the 14th October the British and Belgians fought a most successful battle. As far as the 9th Division was concerned, the 28th Brigade attacked on the right, with the Highlanders prepared to form a defensive flank

on the left, in case the Belgians, who had not crossed that strong system which we had previously taken, were held up. The Belgians also had to take Roulers; and, since they had reached it before, but had lost it through no fault of their own, it was felt that they were biting off just about as much as they could chew, so we must needs take precautions. We were in reserve. Things did not go too well just at first, as the Boche put up a good fight, but eventually Beurt Farm Ridge was taken after an advance of 5000 yards, with fighting every yard of the way. Our gunners came racing up behind this ridge, which gave them their first really good position during the month's fighting. Before our men got there, however, I was sent for by the divisional commander, who had reason to believe that the Boches were massing for a counter-attack. I found him in a deserted farm, and, as we talked, one of our planes, flying very low, was suddenly attacked by a Boche plane which, swooping down from a great height, sugared the plane and us with tracer bullets. In a moment the plane burst into flames and rushed through the air just above our heads. The observer tried to jump with a parachute, but the latter caught up in the machine and he fell to the ground, where we picked him up stone dead. The pilot turned the machine until she was in a vertical position; then she



To face page 264

made a complete *volte-face* and crashed to the ground, a mass of black smoke. There was nothing left of the pilot.

Next day a dozen Boches were captured in the loft of this very farm where we had been standing. They could have shot us any time while we were in the yard, and no one would have been the wiser. In fact the divisional commander started to walk up the ladder leading into the loft, with nothing but his ridiculous little toy of a pistol with which to defend himself. Luckily for him he changed his mind. For one can't help thinking that even the Boche couldn't have resisted such a target, though one can easily understand their aversion to shooting four generals. Anyhow it was a court-martial offence in the Turkish Army !

Opposite Beurt Farm Ridge lay yet another ridge, the last between us and the Lys. This ridge was horseshoe in shape, with three little prominences in the places where the nails ought to be, one-half way up each side and one in the centre. Inside the horseshoe was a wood called Laaga Capelle Wood. This wood, which lay for the most part in the hollow of the horseshoe—though its northern edge was on the high ground—was mostly held by us, and a very unpleasant spot it was to live in, for the Boche shelled it and gassed it the whole of that day and night. There was another

wood—Heule—on the far side of the Steenbeek Ridge, which was the only name we could find for the horseshoe height. The Lowland Brigade was ordered to attack this ridge at 9 A.M. next day, since it was possible to assemble without being visible to the enemy. The plan was for the 11th Royal Scots to rush along the top of one side of the horseshoe (the northern side), and, when they had captured the centre hill, the 12th Royal Scots were to pass through and take the other side (the southern side). The object was to do the unexpected from the Boche point of view ; and it was thought that if we attacked squarely across the low ground, and up at the horseshoe that way, we should not only do exactly what he expected—for everyone knows that the Boche will always attack along the low ground if he can—but we should have a dangerously thin and over-extended line on a very wide front. Whereas, by shoving in the weight all on one place we were bound to succeed, if we could keep him amused at those places where the infantry would not be, but where it was our business to make him think they would be.

Of course we brought the fog of war to our aid ; though, owing to the fact that other people had discovered its virtues, it was difficult to get in unlimited quantities ; for every gun fired smoke for a bit, gradually working along the top of the horseshoe in front of the infantry.

For twenty minutes they were to pound the centre hill, and then leave it free for the 11th Royal Scots to rush in. The same thing was to happen with the southern side of the horseshoe. We also concentrated the fire of fifty odd machine guns on the centre and southern side of that unhappy horseshoe.

At 9 A.M., watching the show from the Beurt Farm Ridge, we saw the 11th, followed closely by the 12th Royal Scots, dash nimbly along the top of the ridge, and then disappear in a perfect witch's cauldron of smoke which the gunners put down. It was so thick that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face, and the 11th Royal Scots found themselves treading on the hostile machine-gunners to the mutual surprise of both. Lager-beer Wood, as we nicknamed it, gave some trouble owing to the presence of those pestilential machine-gunners, who, during the night, had crept forward into the edge of the wood, and so avoided our barrage.

The mopping-up of these machine guns checked the 11th for a bit, so that when they approached the centre of the horseshoe, their final objective on the hill, the smoke had somewhat cleared, enabling two machine-gun groups to see and function against our men. Now two machine guns firing down that glacis slope, with not a patch of cover or fold in the ground, was death to anyone standing up. It forced

our fellows to earth. Then up stood Corporal Elcock, and with his Lewis gun rushed forward at one of the groups ; Fortune smiled, and he managed to kill the two men manning the gun. Jumping into their little shelter he now turned his gun on to the others, who were still firing at him. Again the gods were kind, and Elcock downed the pair of them ; the advance was resumed, and the hill captured. For this Elcock gained the V.C. The importance of his action cannot be over-estimated, since it must be remembered that the 12th had to wait until the 11th had finished their part of the business before continuing the attack and completing the capture of the hill. The 12th quickly succeeded in accomplishing this, though Heule Wood was full of Boches. After this the two leading battalions of the brigade, guided by Winkle with a compass, went streaming off down the hill with field-gunners in close support after the retiring Boche.

We had a check at the Courtrai-Roulers Railway, just south of Capelle St Katherine, in order to reorganise and gain touch with people on our flanks. We found civilians everywhere ; girls and babies crying bitterly from the fright of the hill battle, but the whole population becoming calmer the farther we advanced. The Belgian troops had already started "coffee-housing," as was only natural ; but we soon got into touch with fresh troops,

and their officers promised to watch our flank as we went forward. We had with us a cyclist battalion of Yorkshire Dragoons under T—, about 150 strong. T— was ordered to nip along down one of two parallel roads leading in the direction of the river in order to cover our left flank, and also to keep the Boche on the move and prevent him from rallying, which he now seemed inclined to do.

Things on the right seemed held up, but an interview with the divisional commander who, as was his wont, turned up just when he was wanted, induced us to shove along, flanks or no flanks. At first it was hedgerow fighting, but later the country became more open and hedgeless. We were not the only people who used forward guns that day, for, just after we crossed the railway two Boche field guns began hammering away at us, until Brock of the 12th Royal Scots stalked them with his company, after which we had peace from the south. Not so on the northern flank however; as we advanced we could hear a perfect rattle of musketry. It was T— and his Yorkshires, backed up with some sporting motor machine gunners, driving the Boche in front of them. By 3 p.m. the cyclists were in Cuerne, and T— came back to complain bitterly that the infantry were not coming along fast enough on his left flank. What

had happened was this: shortly after we crossed the railway the Boche put in a counter-attack, a big thing of two or three divisions, which drove the Belgians back at first; eventually they held it, but not before the regiment on our left were ordered back again—the result being that as we advanced the gap not only widened but gave an inviting opening to Boche fresh troops.

We had heard nothing of this counter-attack until we found things very hot away on our left, a long way in rear of the cyclists, who knew nothing of these untoward events, but abused us for not coming along quicker in order to carry the bridgehead at Harlebeke. The 11th Royal Scots at the end of a hard day were called upon to refuse their flank as they advanced, and a tough time they had of it. The Bart., however, adopted the bold policy of going right out into the Blue and encircling the numerous nests of machine-gunners. The 12th on the right were in exactly the same position, with no one on their flank; but as they were not so seriously attacked it didn't delay them so much. The Boche had formed a bridgehead at Harlebeke on our side of the River Lys, by holding high ground, including a windmill. The 11th couldn't shift him that night, though when they attacked next morning the Boche had cleared out to the other side, giving up a

position which would have caused us no end of casualties in the taking of it.

The cyclists and motor machine gunners, foiled at Harlebeke Bridge, struck south. And, just north of Cuerne, where they could see the opposite bank of the river, they found a target which one sometimes dreams of but seldom beholds. It was nothing less than the King's highway simply packed with fleeing traffic, motors, lorries, guns, and what not, all trekking northwards to put themselves at a safe distance from this new drive of ours. Our people shot away every round they had, and then reported the target to Teddy, who attended to it with his guns all through the night. These mounted troops, so well handled—and who wants a better man than the Yeoboy?—had shown us what an ideal combination cyclists and motor machine guns could be if supplied with that essential in fighting—entrails. They had 'em all right as the following will show. It must be remembered that bowling along down a good road on a bog-wheel is not all jam when the country on either side is a morass. For one machine-gunner can call the tune to the whole pack, if he keeps his head. This actually happened. But a noted bruiser, getting off his bike, advanced against the machine-gunner with the remark, as he fixed his bayonet, "I'll give the blighter a dose of this." The machine gun caught him well up on the thigh, giving him an awful wound, but

not before he had frightened the machine-gunners so thoroughly that they gave our men free passage.

Cuerne was a seething mass of civilians of all shapes and sizes, delighted to see us, but they cleared off when the Boche started shelling our headquarters with 5·9's. At about 5 P.M., a patrol from the division on our right which, owing to heavy fighting on its right flank had not been able to advance, was informed by us that we had captured Cuerne. It surprised us, therefore, afterwards to read in the official report that Cuerne had been captured by the 29th Division ; but doubtless this report was due to a clerical error.

The people of Cuerne told us that thousands of Boche infantry had come through the village half an hour before our arrival ; but that they had no discipline, appeared panic-stricken, and had looted everything they could lay their hands on.

That night the Boche gave Cuerne a heavy gas-shell bombardment, though he knew perfectly well that the place was crowded with women and children. It was horrible to see them suffering from the effects of gas, for they had no masks, and they all crowded into the cellars where the gas hung about longer than anywhere else.

We did a reconnaissance at dawn next morning with a view to getting across the Lys—

at this place 80 yards wide—and forming a bridgehead. We found an ideal spot, a bend in the river, almost an arc in fact, with the main Harlebeke-Courtrai road closing the enemy's side, so that all we had to do was to cross the bend and line up along a deep ditch which happened to be on our side of the road, with our flanks protected by the river itself. In addition to the protection afforded to such a position by the river bend, there was a house on either flank which could be made into strong points. South and north of the bend the river ran dead straight from south to north. About 500 yards north of the bend were several mills of many stories; these mills commanded the left bank—our side—of the river, and since they were stiff with machine-gunners we were at a considerable disadvantage. And, though there was a bridge at this point, it was so thoroughly commanded by the mills, one of which was right over it, that it was not considered advisable to make the attempt here. About half a mile down-stream (north) were the ruins of the main Harlebeke Bridge, but we got such a warm reception here that our reconnaissance came to a somewhat abrupt termination; for the Boche machine guns swept the whole of the bare country on our side.

Later on in the day we got trench-mortared from the direction of Harlebeke Church near the main bridge; a boy who pluckily swam

across told us there were two trench mortars in action close under the shelter of the church, and that there was an officers' club near the church. It seemed to be worth our while, therefore, to treat the church as datum for our guns, especially as machine guns were posted in and were firing from the church tower. Our policy all through was to leave the villages and towns alone, for fear of killing civilians, but of course the Boche availed himself of our humanity ; he had no hesitation either in strafing our villages without mercy even when there was nothing to be gained by so doing.

Our trench mortars, 6-inch, had been placed on limbers for visibility, and, well handled and well led, they did exceptionally fine work hereabouts. One gun snuggled behind Cuerne Church and pounded away merrily in spite of the Boche's well-meant efforts to knock it out with 5·9-inches. The Bart. thought it possible to cross near Harlebeke ; so it was decided to put the Borderers across and to form a bridge-head in the bend of the river south of Harlebeke, while the 11th Royal Scots created a diversion near Harlebeke Bridge.

The Borderers got across all right that night, effecting a complete surprise ; for the state of the ground within the bend of the river, where the Borderers formed up after crossing, must have resembled Sedgemoor on the night of the battle. It was intersected with dykes, over a

man's head in places, and fairly wide. The attack was a great success, though the road which closed the bend of the river, and which commanded it, was strongly held. But the troops absolutely panicked. We found out later from prisoners that the whole force left their very strong position in the Harlebeke district when they heard that our men were across the river; and that numbers of them were not induced to return till well on in the following day.

But the 11th Royal Scots had no fortune. As they approached the river with their bridging party they were absolutely collared by machine guns which had spotted them. Poor Little of the 90th Field Company and many of his men were knocked over, and the attempt, which had depended entirely on surprise for its success, was abandoned. As soon as two companies of the Borderers had consolidated their position on the bridgehead, a third company was sent over to exploit towards Harlebeke. This company caught it badly from the mills, and it was ordered to come back to the bridgehead. Owing to its heavy losses it was relieved by the remaining company of the Borderers that night, while two companies of the 12th Royal Scots were brought up in close support on our side of the river.

As we crossed the bend of the river next morning just before dawn we had every oppor-

tunity of testing the going, by falling into the numerous dykes! The going was just about as bad as it could be, and this made the performance of the Borderers even more creditable.

While we were on the northern flank of the bridgehead we saw the S.O.S. go up on the southern flank. There was a good deal of rifle and machine-gun fire, but no response from the guns. As it was very exceptional for our fellows to use the S.O.S. signal, we rushed off to the nearest telephone to call up the gunners, but we didn't get on for over twenty minutes as the lines were all dished owing to the heavy barrage which the Boche had put down in Cuerne. It was, in fact, far worse on our side of the river than on his. He attacked with a fresh division, the 7th Cavalry Division, and at first he had a certain amount of success, for he broke our centre. The situation was at once restored by a smart counter-attack on the part of the flanks, who charged in with the bayonet—a weapon to which the Borderers were addicted—White playing a conspicuous part in this charge, and Durward being killed. The two companies of the 12th Royal Scots were sent over to reinforce.

By this time both bridges, which had been built too close together, were more or less destroyed by the heavy shelling. Yet, half wading and half swimming, with their rifles above their heads, these fine troops led by

G—— and Brock, formed up on the other side under a fierce artillery and machine-gun fire, and then went forward to the support of their brother Lowlanders as if on parade, so correctly were their movements performed. In the meantime, on our extreme right, two platoons of the 29th Division had crossed in the night; and they by their plucky resistance were largely instrumental in frustrating the attempts on that flank.

All that day the Boche shelled our positions heavily, though our fellows, for the most part sheltering behind the high bank on our side of the road, were fairly safe, a fact which made this bridgehead such an ideal position. We sent over a platoon by day with ammunition, though the bridges were supposed to be destroyed; but, holding the ammunition well above their heads, they were able to take it across. We also got aeroplanes to drop ammunition and rations, which they did most successfully, and, what was more important, the aeroplanes raised the moral of our men. A section of machine-gunners had been sent over the night before, and, since it was entirely due to their efforts and to those of the infantry—for the gunners didn't fire—that a strong counter-attack made by fresh troops had been decisively repelled, it was not considered likely by us, who had some experience of Boche tactics by this time, that he would repeat the

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attack when every gun was laid on ready for him, in addition to our infantry being better prepared for him. Every minute makes a new position stronger. It should also be remembered that a bridgehead, when once consolidated, need not necessarily be the death-trap which some people appear to imagine; for if numerous ferries are used, the places can be concealed by day and constantly shifted by night, which makes it impossible for the Boche to know where we are crossing. Imagine our dismay when we were told that the bridgehead was to be abandoned, for another division were side-stepping and taking over a large portion of our present front, including our bridgehead: and it had been decided, in view of the policy at this time, that the retention of a bridgehead was likely to prove too costly; in which view the authorities were doubtless perfectly right from their own point of view—but what about ours? Here had we been losing heavily, though by no means too heavily for the important results attained; and the men were to be shown that the whole thing had been wasted. This was not likely to prove highly encouraging in our next venture!

Eventually we effected a compromise. Our relieving brigadier himself took covering parties of his people to satisfy himself about the question of staying there. In the meantime we withdrew after having been relieved by his

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men, in order that our people should know that they had been relieved before they left the scene of their victory. Not only this, but the relieving brigadier did everything he possibly could by means of ferries to speed up the crossing for our people, more than half of whom made use of their ferries, though a good number crossed by a standing bridge which our sappers had constructed early in the night.

It was no concern of ours what the relieving division decided to do; but our view of hanging on was justified, since, two days later, the division were called upon to recross the river in the grand attack which took place on the night of the 19/20th October. In this attack the Highlanders were on the right, the 28th Brigade were on the left, while the Lowlanders were in reserve. About 11 A.M. we crossed the river by an excellent bridge, one of many that our sappers had built under fire during the previous night. Our people had to throw bridges across some 80 yards of unfordable river in face of an alert enemy, get a footing on the bank, and assault a very strongly wired line at dawn. Further, as soon as they had captured this line they were to push on, and this required the presence of our gunners who would have to cross in ample time to assist them. So the sappers had a mighty tough problem, and it was largely owing to H—

the C.R.E., that everything went without a hitch.

This bridging' business was hurled at our heads at a moment's notice, without any previous training, though the sappers were supposed to know something about it; in point of fact they knew very little about bridging expedients, which is really what is wanted.

One was very much struck with the good work of our sappers when one compared it later on—down and up river—with the work of others. I met the divisional commander, as usual near the forefront of the battle, and, as he was just going up in his car to visit the Highland Brigade headquarters, I went along with him. We had to hurry through Deerlyck, which was being heavily crumped though full of terrified civilians, and finally we found the Highlanders in a snug little place which they had found. There was quite a lot of shelling, especially round an encampment in which we had put our brigade. On getting back we found our headquarters in a very nice old farm near the river. The farmer told us that the Boche flying officers had been there the night before. All round Harlebeke were aerodromes from which the Boche used to venture out on his London raids—at least so we were told. The old farmer, in token of his deliverance, offered to sell us butter at 20 francs a pound, which made us wonder what was his retail price to the Boche officers. But

perhaps it was a wholesale transaction--wholesale robbery on the Boche's part; though we didn't quite see why the old gentleman should come the wholesale robbery stunt on us.

By the end of the day the 9th Division had bitten into the Boche line to the tune of several thousand yards, but we were still some way short of Vichté. The division on our left had been forced, ever since they crossed the river, to form a defensive flank because the French were not ready to go that day. The result was that the farther we advanced the more extended did their flank become—a poisonous state of affairs for them, poor chaps.

Early next morning I was warned to be ready to go for Vichté and the high ground to the east of it, from which the Boche were giving "blue hell" to our people down in the hollow. We did a hurried reconnaissance with the C.O.'s, settled our position of assembly for the attacking troops—11th Royal Scots and Borderers—fixed on a brigade headquarters in a farm near by; and then we all rushed back in pouring rain to submit plans and to bring up the troops. We were told to be ready to attack at 10 A.M., when it was expected that the division on our left would be up in line with us; we had no such confidence, for we knew their extraordinary difficulties. However, by the time orders were despatched we had only just time to reach the position of assembly by galloping hard the whole

way. We were just in time as we raced up to the farm, my mare in a muck-sweat, and got to work. Half an hour passed, one hour passed ; still no sign of the division on our left. About this time things were not quite so strenuous, and I was able to look around. J. M——, commanding the 12th Royal Scots, came up and remarked that we were in the wrong farm ; that we were actually in the farm to which he had been told to come himself, and that our farm was about 100 yards away. On looking out we found that he was right ; both farms were very much alike, and they were both near the railway ; but the farm we had come to by mistake completely screened the farm which we had selected before. Telling J. M—— that he had better put his lads in the other farm, we decided to stop where we were, as by this time the cable cart had arrived, and we were in touch with the division, who told us to take over the line from the 28th Brigade since there would be no attack that day. While discussing the details of relief with J. M——, whose battalion was to take over, H—— of the 12th Royal Scots rushed in to say that the farm in which they were had been heavily crumpled, and that nearly all battalion headquarters of the 12th Royal Scots had been knocked out, including Sammy M'Kinley, the adjutant. It was indeed a blow, for Sammy was the soul of the regiment. What can one say more ! He lost his eye, poor old

chap, and got some nasty wounds in other places, of which he afterwards died.

At the same time we ourselves couldn't help feeling what a providential escape I had had, apparently by a pure accident.

Teddy has not been mentioned lately, but Teddy was always with us, and he never backed us up more than on our last great fight together. Our job was to capture Vichté and the high ground about a mile east of it known as Hill 50; the division on our right had to take a similar ridge, while the division on our left were to capture yet another ridge called Klijtberg, which was separated from us by a railway cutting of the Courtrai-Audenarde railway. This railway ran due east and west, and it practically cut in half our position of assembly which was about 2000 yards from our position of deployment near Vichté station. Until we reached this position of deployment we were concealed from view from Hill 50. But the problem was how to get the brigade up to Vichté village, and later, on to Hill 50, without being unmercifully strafed. Again the frontage allotted was far too much for a weak brigade, and so one was induced to put in all the weight against the village of Vichté, afterwards changing direction and attacking Hill 50.

In order to conceal our movements Teddy gave us every round of smoke he had, and,

though it didn't amount to much, yet owing to the condition of the atmosphere such a fog was created that one found it difficult to move about. The railway, however, was our guide, for we only had to follow that to come to Vichté, and later to Hill 50. The 11th Royal Scots, the leading battalion, rushed Vichté with comparative ease, since no one saw them coming and the garrison had gone to ground in the cellars as soon as the bombardment started; but when they had passed the village the garrison came to life with a vengeance, and the Borderers, who were in support of the 11th Royal Scots, had to turn their attention to the place and mop it up.

In the meantime the Boche put down a heavy gas bombardment, which forced our men to wear their masks, cramping their movements considerably. The 11th succeeded in getting to the lower slopes of Hill 50, but, owing to the presence of the enemy on the high ground north of the cutting at Klijtberg, which was a long way out of our area, they were badly hammered from that quarter, losing two company commanders, Thomas and Blackie, and finding themselves unable to complete the capture of the Hill 50 on its southern side. A——, a battery commander of the 50th Brigade R.F.A., had brought his battery to within 300 yards of Klijtberg, from

which the 11th Royal Scots were being hammered, thinking that it had been taken by the division on our left. The enemy very soon showed him that they were still in residence, and A—— had quite an exciting time, firing over open sights against machine guns. Later he turned on to Hill 50, helping the Borderers to complete the capture of the hill. At 3 P.M. the result of the fight was that we were sitting perched on top of Hill 50, with a gap of 1000 yards on our right, and Klijtberg, north of the cutting and nearly as high as Hill 50, still held by the enemy. That night this ridge was taken by the division on our left, so we were all right in that quarter, but the gap on our right was not closed till the early hours by our old friends the Watch.

Going back that night we nearly walked into the Boche lines. We had lost our map, we had no compass, and it was as dark as pitch. We had seen the Bart., and after looking up J. M—— we stumped off down a lonely road which the Boche was sugaring with gas shells. Then we came to a T road, and the question was whether we should go to the right or the left. Not knowing any better we went to the right. Had we gone to the left we should have walked into a Boche post which was 800 yards down the road. Early next morning

we were up again, and it was then that we realised what a lucky escape we had had.

Our position on Hill 50, now that Klijtberg Hill was taken, was very strong. It also gave us a good jumping-off place for an attack on the last ridge between us and the Scheldt, that river being now only 7000 yards away; also the Boche confined himself to shelling Vichté and the station, instead of area shoots all round our brigade headquarters. Civilians were all over the place in crowds. As we crept round our front line, going canny for fear of Boche snipers, we suddenly came upon an old dame in the backyard of a badly strafed house, engaged in doing the family washing! We strongly advised her to shift before she was moved on by one of the many shells which were passing over at the time.

For the Boche had a lot of guns here, and plenty of ammunition which he did not hesitate to use, and the trouble was that one never knew what he was going to strafe next. His deliberate habit of picking out some devoted spot and then knocking hell out of it seemed to have been replaced by sudden area shoots, infinitely more effective.

Heavy guns now began to arrive, and we sniffed another battle. We were right.

A few days after our battle we were relieved, and next morning the Highlanders and 28th Brigade attacked and captured the villages of

Ingoyghem and Ooteghem, after heavy fighting, involving heavy casualties to both brigades ; and, since we had all suffered very heavily in a month's fighting carried on without a break, the whole division was relieved on Sunday, 27th October, but not before our patrols had reached the Scheldt. We had gone 26 miles in twenty-eight days, and we had been called upon to fight for every yard of it.

A few days later there was another big attack in which tanks were used, and in which all the objectives were taken. During our strenuous month's fighting we had never seen a tank, chiefly owing to the state of the ground. And this should surely enhance the achievements of the 9th Division, whose doings would appear to have been rather overshadowed by those of other divisions farther south. With the exception of the big attack at Arras on the 9th April, the division never used tanks at all during the whole war. On the occasion of the Arras battle, the tanks—through no fault of their own—were behind the infantry, and consequently had no effect on the day's operations. It is claimed, therefore, that we are the only division which has never used tanks—surely a unique record !

CHAPTER XV

BLUE BONNETS ACROSS THE BORDER

By a happy coincidence "Blue Bonnets" was the regimental march of all three battalions of the Lowland Brigade; consequently it was adopted as our brigade march-past on those rare occasions when we indulged in ceremonial. Such an occasion occurred during the first week in November when we were inspected by H.M. the King of the Belgians. All things considered it was a highly satisfactory turn-out; especially so on the part of the gunners, who had but just come out of the line. It was a treat to watch them, as we waited our turn to go by; for they marched past like a solid wall. Then came the Highlanders, swinging by in their kilts—what a show a kilt does make on a ceremonial parade!—then the Lowlanders; and lastly the 28th Brigade. A great crowd of Americans watched the performance, and their remarks, which were quite audible, were very much to the point. Afterwards the King, accompanied by his Queen, both riding, made a speech to the senior officers,

in which he thanked us for all we had done, and so on.

And all the time the rain splashed down on the aerodrome on which the parade was held, marring what would otherwise have been a magnificent pageant. For it is not every day that one sees an entire division, horse, foot, and guns, all assembled together in one place; especially a division which has just come out of battle. Our divisional commander afterwards gave our divisional badge—everyone in the division wore a little white metal thistle on blue cloth on either shoulder—to the Queen, who promptly made a brooch of it. So far as we know the only other lady who has been given this badge is the Princess Mary, who received it from the Lowland Brigade on becoming Colonel of the Royal Scots. Possibly, however, there may have been other presentations, to judge from the number of deficiencies of the badge on the part of returning leave men!

We were billeted at this time in Cuerne of bitter memory, and we soon became uncommonly comfortable. The extraordinary thing was that our Lowlanders could carry on a conversation with these Flemings, for many words were common to both races: not that we liked the Flemings particularly, for they are not half such good fellows as the Walloons who live for the most part on the east side of Belgium, and who

showed their appreciation of us as we marched through their country later on.

Then came the Armistice like a bolt from the blue. None of us had any idea that the end was so near, but we all knew that the Higher Command was getting ready to administer the absolute final punch which would have caused an utter debacle. So we felt that it was a pity he didn't get his punch, the Boche. And, since coming into Germany, we have found no cause to alter our opinion, for he has been lately talking very big about his unbeaten heroes.

Shortly after the Armistice was declared we, together with the 29th Division, were selected for the post of honour—to be nothing less than the spearhead of the British Army during its advance to the Rhine; and later these two divisions and the Canadians were selected to hold the bridgehead. So not only were we the only Scottish Division but the only Service Division in the British Army of Occupation. On 7th December, the Lowland Brigade crossed the border to the tune of Blue Bonnets. As we stood at the frontier post and watched the old brigade swing by we could not help thinking of all those gallant souls who had gone west, owing to whose gallantry on many a stricken field we were still able, at the end of the war, to maintain our high standard of efficiency. For we always felt that those who had fallen in action were still

with us in spirit, and that it was by reason of their presence that we had always been able, under the most trying conditions, to do our duty. It is a good old simple belief which has carried us right through the war.

In war, in order to stick it out day after day, winter and summer, in face of set-backs and disasters, religion is essential. This fact has been proved again and again in all wars. To quote but a few cases:—What made the warriors of Saladin invincible? Their religion. What made the Ironsides of Cromwell the terror of Europe? What made Fuzzy Wuzzy break a British square? And, in the present war, why were the Scottish troops the best fighting material in the world? The same answer—Religion. Whether a man be a Ghazi or a Gloucester, a Hottentot or a Highlander, provided he is soaked with religious fervour which makes him forgetful of self, ready to offer himself willingly as a sacrifice, taking no count of his body as compared with his immortal soul, that man is invincible in battle, and an army of such men can rule the world. But this religion must be no affair of mushroom growth—the religion which comes to a man who hears a crump for the first time. No, no; it must be ingrained; taught from babyhood. Oh, make no mistake about it, religion is the mainspring of the Happy Warrior.

For those who have lost their dearest, to

whom life must be a blank, it may possibly be some slight comfort to know how we all felt in the Lowland Brigade to those who had died with us. And it was the custom, in at least one battalion, after every battle, for the battalion to parade as strong as possible, in close column. Then the buglers played the Last Post while the battalion presented arms.

There is little more to tell. But a saying of General Foy's, in his history of the Peninsular War, may be of interest. He has said, writing nearly a century ago, that the condition of the British soldier never retrogrades; but that, retaining all the good qualities that his predecessors had acquired, he superadds to these, from generation to generation, whatever of improvement each may have happened to produce. The history of the British Army in this last great war fully bears out the assertion of the French writer.

And now here we are in the heart of our enemies. We do not understand them, neither do we appreciate their manners, or lack of manners, as the following two incidents will show.

A padre—O—, as a matter of fact—was coming back from Cologne by train. The carriage was crowded and O— offered his seat to a lady, who gladly accepted it. On getting out at her destination, instead of taking it for granted that O— would resume his

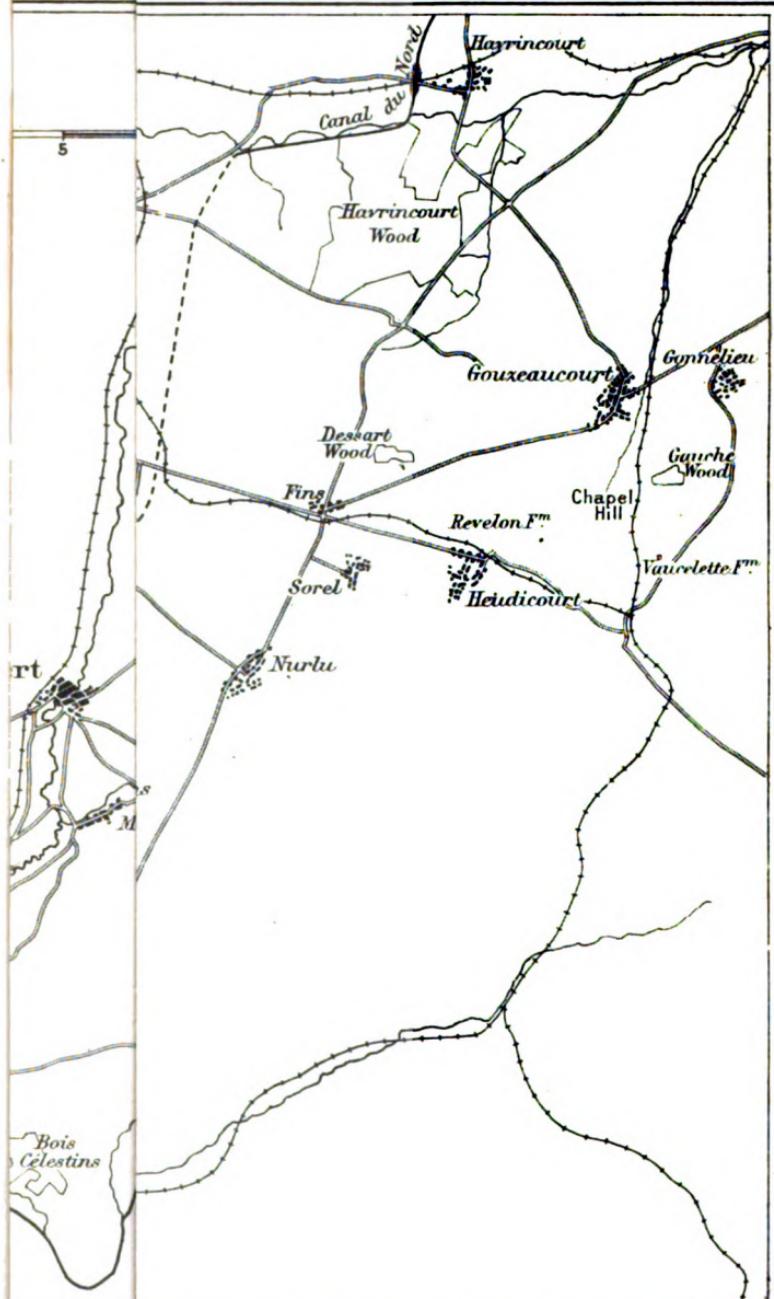
seat, she went out of her way to offer the place to one of her own countrymen who was also standing. O——, who understood German perfectly, looked at the German ; the German looked at O—— and remarked that he preferred to stand. So much for their manners !

A funeral was passing one of our guards. The sentry came to attention and saluted the funeral. A well-dressed man walked up to the sentry and remarked in English :—

“ You are our enemies, but—your manners are perfect.”

And that is the motto of the British Army in Germany. Because the Hun is a Hun, that is no reason why we should copy him.





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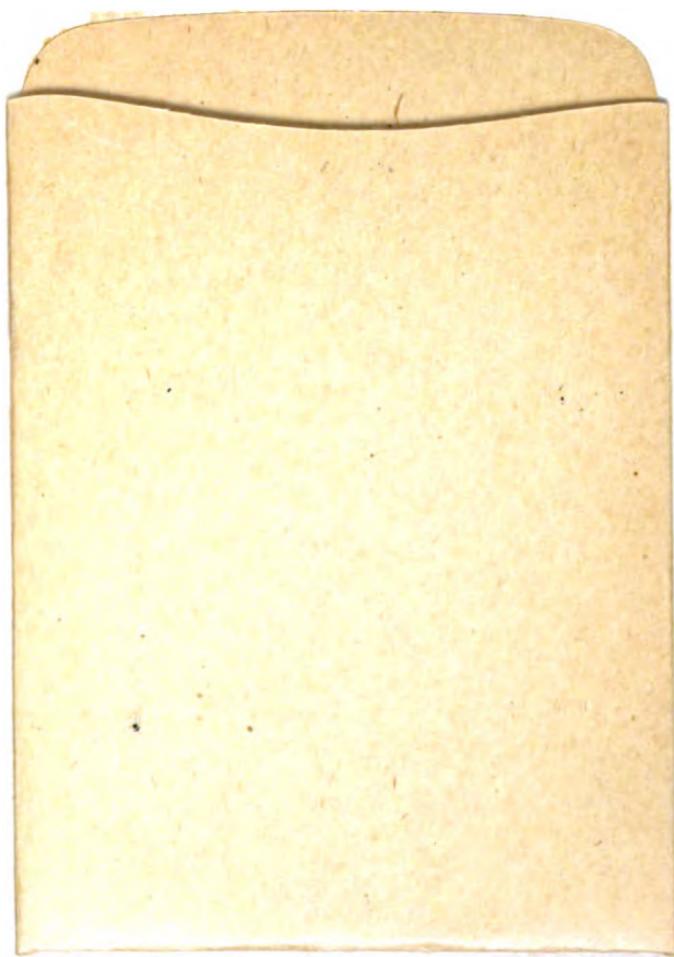
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